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SAMUEL RAYNARD SHOOK HIS FIST AT THE LIGHTED WINDOW OF THE ROOM IN WHICH
THE SICK MAN LAY.

Ben Bandy, the Boss Pard;

OR,

THE PLUCKY PARSON.

BY J. STANLEY HENDERSON,
AUTHOR OF "UNCLE EPH'S BOYS," "THE TELL-TALE BULLET," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TWO TRAVELERS.

NEAR the close of the year 1835, two men were traveling through the wilds of Arkansas, toward the Chickasaw Bend of the Mississippi.

It was evident that they had not long been traveling together, but had lately joined company, for their manner was quite reserved, as if their acquaintance was a new one, and they were still suspicious of each other, as strangers would naturally be, in that wild and unsettled region.

There was good reason for this mutual distrust, for that part of the country, as well as the greater portion of Tennessee, Mississippi and Alabama, was known to be infested with numerous and well-organized bands of desperadoes and marauders, who were the terror, not only of travelers, but of all peaceable citizens through the vast extent of territory which they infested.

They had grown to be so powerful, and their deeds of robbery and murder were so frequent, that every traveler felt that he carried his life in his hands, and that it behooved him to view with a suspicious eye any stranger whom he might happen to meet.

The elder of the two travelers was a powerfully-built man, apparently about fifty years of age, with iron-gray hair, bronzed and strongly-marked features, and a pair of splendid dark eyes. Under a rough overcoat he wore a black broadcloth frock-coat, buttoned up to his chin. As his outer coat was thrown open, it could be seen that this article of apparel was threadbare and shining, as if it had done its owner long and faithful service. He rode a powerful horse, and over his saddle-flaps hung two capacious and well-stuffed saddle-bags.

The younger, who might have counted about half as many years as his companion, was rather slender and delicate in person, and was very well dressed for that time and country, wearing a heavy overcoat, a military cap, and boots that reached to his knees. His horse was a fine sorrel, and he, as well as his companion, carried a pair of well-filled saddle-bags. From the breast of his coat peeped out the butt of a pistol, and a closer inspection would have revealed the handle of a knife within the capacious leather of his right boot.

"The air is quite keen, this afternoon," said the young man, "although the sky is clear and the sun shines brightly enough. I hope it will be a fine night for traveling, as I fear that I will find no shelter before I reach the river."

"I am sorry to say that your hopes are vain," responded his companion. "The sky is clear

now, as you say, but there are indications of a change in the weather, and I believe the Lord has decreed that there shall be a storm, before another twelve hours goes to swell the boundless ocean of eternity."

"You speak poetically, if not truly. Do you claim to be weatherwise? For my part, I never pretend to foretell a storm, until I see it coming."

"I make no pretensions, young sir; but I may say that I have traveled this wild country during many years past, by day and by night. Having been, as I may say, almost continually in the saddle, I have journeyed many thousands of miles, and during those journeyings I have encountered all kinds of hardships. I have been compelled to swim the swollen rivers, to suffer exposure to the pitiless storms, to sleep on the bare ground shelterless, to go for days with insufficient food, or with none at all, and nothing has sustained me but the grace of God and an iron constitution. I should have been dull indeed, if I had not gained some knowledge, not only of the modes and routes of travel, but also of the signs whereby our fallible judgment may be in some degree informed concerning the weather that is in store for us. I think I am safe in predicting that we shall have a storm tonight."

"I am glad to have fallen in with you, although you are one of the prophets who foretell evil. I always like to know what I have to expect, that I may prepare myself accordingly. I would be glad to learn, if you are willing to inform me, in what direction you are going, and how far I may have the pleasure of your company!"

"If you would tell me where you are going, I can easily answer your question," replied the elder, with a sidelong glance at his companion. "At the same time, if you choose, you may inform me who and what you are. I do not wish to seem suspicious, but you are aware, probably, that the country is full of wicked and lawless men, who do not hesitate to openly commit deeds of violence, and it is the duty of all travelers to be on their guard, and to associate only with those who can give a good account of themselves. I trust you will take no offense at what I say, but I perceive that you are well armed, and I suppose that you have some sufficient reason for carrying deadly weapons."

"I never take offense, sir, where none is intended. Your question is a proper one, and it gives me pleasure to answer it. My name is Edward Starling, and I am commonly called Ned Starling by my friends and acquaintances. During some time past, I have been fighting the Indians on the frontier, where I was known as Lieutenant Starling. At present, I am on my way to Madison county, in the State of Tennessee, where I have bought a tract of land, and where I intend to locate. I may add, that there is a young lady in that county, whom in due course of time, I expect to claim as my wife. It is many months since I have been able to hear from her, but I am convinced that she has not forgotten me, and that she is ready to fulfill the promise she made to me long ago. With regard to my arms, I carry them partly because, as a soldier, it has become a habit with me, and

partly because I consider them necessary for my protection in this wild and lawless country."

"Well and frankly spoken, friend Starling, for so I trust I may now address you. I must confess that I do not like your nickname of Ned, and I shall not use it, as it appears to me to savor of idle and profitless speaking, but I am pleased with you, and I will be as frank as you have been with me. My name is Benjamin Higbie, and I am a minister of the gospel."

"I thought you looked like a traveling preacher," interrupted the young man.

"You may call me so if you choose, for I am an itinerant elder of the Methodist Church."

"Yours is a hard, a self-sacrificing, and a painful life, and I presume you are poorly enough paid for your labor."

"Poorly paid, so far as money goes, I grant you," rejoined Higbie. "I have found it very difficult to maintain my growing family, of seven fine children, of whom four are sons, and three are grown.

"But to change the subject, friend Starling, at what point do you propose to cross the river?"

"That is just what I can't tell you, because I don't know. I hoped to find some one on the road who could direct me, and perhaps you would be both able and willing to do me that favor."

"Willing, I certainly am, and I trust that I am able also. I propose to cross at a point opposite the house of a worthy minister of the Gospel, the Reverend Mr. Hargons, who lives a few miles below the Chickasaw Bluff. I have no doubt that he can ferry me across the river. If you desire to join me, I shall be happy to have your company, and can assure you that you will be kindly and comfortably entertained at the home of brother Hargons."

"I thank you with all my heart," warmly replied Starling, "and I accept your offer as freely as it is made. As you would say, sir, the Lord seems to have sent you to me, to relieve me from my perplexity, for I am very anxious to reach my journey's end, and especially anxious to see the dear girl who is waiting for me in Tennessee."

As the young man spoke, he pointed toward the northeast, where a dark and ominous cloud was rising rapidly, threatening soon to cover the entire face of the sky. In a few moments the bright sun went under the cloud, and at the same time there was a sensible change in the wind, which became so chilly and uncomfortable that the travelers shivered under its influence, and were fain to button up their great-coats.

"It is even so," said father Higbie, gazing rather mournfully at the leaden-colored sky. "It has come upon us sooner than I had anticipated, which proves that my judgment of the weather is not infallible. My fleshly wisdom is weak indeed, but when I touch upon the salvation of souls, I do not speak from my own judgment, but from the inspired word of God, which is sure, and which endureth forever."

"Do you know how far we are from the river?"

"Many miles yet, and I greatly fear that we shall not be able to reach it to-night. Even if

we should, we would not be able to cross in such a storm as we are likely to have, for it promises to be very severe."

"What shall we do, then? I am used to roughing it, and can pass the night in the open air as well as anybody; but I must admit that my long journey has greatly fatigued both myself and my horse, and that I had much rather sleep under the shelter of a roof, than camp on the bare ground, with a hail-storm or a snow-storm for my covering."

"It is natural, and I am not ashamed to confess that I covet rest, both for myself and my horse. If we can reach the river, we may be able to find accommodations in the cabin of some wood-cutter; if we can not reach it, we must trust to Providence, for the chance of finding a house among the swamps and cane-brakes that lie between us and the river is a very poor one."

"We must make up our minds to the worst, then, and I suppose we shall be obliged to get the best speed we can put on our jaded animals. Here comes the storm, and the night will soon be upon us."

Starling struck the spurs into his horse, and father Higbie pounded the flanks of his black with his heels, and both animals started forward at a better pace, while the wind blew more fiercely from the northeast, and the sleet pelted the weary travelers right savagely.

Thus they rode on, and the sleet was succeeded by snow, and the night closed in upon them, and the road became a blind one, and they stumbled through cane-brakes, and waded morasses, until they began to despair, and to believe that they had really lost their way. Still they pushed and floundered on, while the snow fell faster, and the night grew darker and wore away apace.

"I am growing discouraged, father Higbie," said the young man, at last, "and it seems to me that the only thing we can do will be to stop at the first patch of timber we find, and camp for the night, and make the best of it."

"I still have faith, friend Starling," answered the preacher, "and I pray you to ride on a little further, for I think I see a little glimmering through the darkness in the distance, and I am impressed with the belief that we shall find a house when we reach that light."

So they continued to ride on, stumbling through cane-brakes and floundering among morasses, until the light became distinct, and they reached the border of a lake, when they saw that it proceeded from a small and rude log-cabin. Joyfully they rode up to the cabin, and Starling greeted the inmates with a whoop and a halloo, by way of a salute, and for the purpose of arousing them.

CHAPTER II.

IN A ROBBERS' DEN.

OUR travelers had not long to wait, for the door of the cabin was hastily thrown open, and they were greeted by a rough-looking man, who stood in the door as he spoke to them.

"Is that you, boss? Who have you got with you this trip? No, 'tain't the boss. I reckoned he wouldn't come over in *sech* a storm. Who

are you, anyhow, and what in thunder are you doin' here at this time o' night?"

"We are strangers and travelers," answered Ned, "and we want a night's lodging and food for ourselves and our horses, for which we are willing to pay you well."

"Tain't the ones we was lookin' fur," said the man, as he turned and spoke to some one within the cabin. "They 'pear to be a couple of chaps as have lost tha'r way, and they want to stay all night. Shall I take 'em in?"

The answer was inaudible to the travelers, but the man again faced them, and addressed them somewhat more cordially:

"This ain't no tavern, stranger, and we ain't fixed fur travelers, as it's mighty seldom they come along this way; but I reckon you're tol'able tired, and I wouldn't turn a dog out o' the house sech a night as this; so I reckon I'll take you in, and do fur you as well as I can. Do you say you're able to pay well fur it, young man?"

"I am both able and willing to pay you the full value of the accommodation," answered Starling. "You see that we can go no further to-night, and we must camp out in the storm unless you give us shelter."

"Wal, I reckon you may 'light down, then, and walk in, ef you're willin' to put up with what we can do fur you. You're sure you're able to pay well fur it, young man?"

"I have answered that question once," tartly replied Starling, as he threw himself from his horse. "I will pay you in advance, if you wish."

The preacher also dismounted, and the two travelers, carrying their saddle-bags, followed their host into the cabin, while a negro-man led their horses to a sort of out-house.

The cabin was a double one, and the side into which our friend's were ushered was separated from the other by a log partition. The only furniture it contained was a puncheon table, a couple of thick logs, a pile of blankets and buffalo-robés in a corner, and a barrel that evidently held whisky. The floor was of beaten earth, and the room was warmed by a great fire that blazed in a large fireplace, and dimly lighted by a wick that floated on the surface of some melted grease in an iron saucer. On the logs sat two villainous-looking men, who seemed to have been cast in the same mold with the landlord, and one who was better dressed and more respectable in appearance leaned against the wall near the fireplace. On the pile of blankets, with her face in her hands, sat a sallow, bony and ugly woman, swaying to and fro, as if she had smelt too frequently of the whisky-barrel.

When the strangers entered, all lifted up their heads, and looked at them suspiciously, except the man near the fire, who smiled pleasantly, and greeted the new-comers with much cordiality.

"It is but poor accommodation that our host is able to offer you," he said, as he extended his hand to Starling; "but, I am sure that you are welcome to it, such as it is."

"We are glad enough to get it, and it is not likely that we will make any complaints," answered the young man. "We feared that we should be obliged to camp out in the storm to-

night, and we would be churlish indeed if we were not grateful for the shelter of a roof."

"I see no occasion for gratitude, when you are able to pay well for it, as you told our host two or three times."

"I am willing to pay, as a matter of course; but that does not render the accommodation less welcome. I seldom carry much money about me, but I believe I have enough for traveling expenses."

"We are indeed grateful for this shelter, both on our own account and for the saka of our beasts," said the preacher, turning to the owner of the cabin.

"You're welcome enough, 's long as you pay fur it," replied the backwoodsman. "But who in thunder are you, anyhow, and whar did you come from? Do you travel on the cross, or on the square?"

"For my part," returned Father Higbie, "I am proud to say that I travel in the service of the cross, and have done so for thirty years past."

"You must be an old hand at the business—older than most of us. Do you hear him, Mr. Boyd?—this chap says he is on the cross."*

The man of respectable appearance stepped forward, and peered earnestly into the preacher's face.

"Yes, my friends," continued Father Higbie, "during thirty years I have preached the cross and Him crucified, and I hope to die in the harness.

"A whinin', cantin' preacher!" exclaimed the backwoodsman, and the man called Boyd turned away with a sneer.

"It seems that I have misapprehended your meaning," said Father Higbie. "I had supposed, from your remark about the Cross, that I had been so fortunate as to fall in with a Christian family. Is that your wife, my friend, who sits yonder in the corner?"

"Yaae," that's my wife," snappishly retorted the man, "and she's drunk now, ef you want to know—so drunk she can't set up, and she gits drunk whenever she wants to, and so do I, and so do all the rest of us, and that thar bar'l is about half-full of whisky, and I hain't got any childern, nor no hosses nor stock, and I ain't a farmer, but live jest now I can, and this here house belongs to me, but the land don't, 'cause I'm only squattin' on it, and ef you want to ax any more questions, here I am, ready to answer 'em, and I want to finish the job to onc't."

"I have no further inquiries to make, except to ask whether you have anything in the house that we can eat."

"Trust a travelin' parson for that!" sneered the backwoodsman. "They'll fu'st ask whether you've got a Bible in the house, and next they'll want to know what you've got to eat. Wal, we hain't got nothin', 'ceptin' some cold deer-meat and some cold corn-dodgers, though p'raps I mought hunt up a scrap or two of bacon. We hain't got no coffee, but thar's whisky in the bar'l, and water in the lake. I s'pose you'd like to pitch into some fried chicken, with corn dumplin's and light bread and b'iled potaters,

"On the cross,"—a slang phrase for living dishonestly.

and top off with pies and hot coffee, but you won't get no sech fancy fixin's here."

Young Starling, who had hung his overcoat on the wall near the fire, and had thrown his saddle-bags beneath it, came to the rescue of his clerical friend.

"Bring out your eatables, old chap, whatever they may be," he exclaimed, as he slapped the backwoodsman on the back. "I can promise you that one of us, at least, will do justice to them, for I am as hungry as a wolf, and I think my friend is half-famished, too. For my part, I would like to pay my respects to the barrel, if you have some good whisky in it, and I hope you will join me."

"In course I will, stranger," answered the man, "and I reckon, fur that matter, we're all on us gittin' dry."

"All right. Call them up, and I will pay the bill. But before I drink with a man, I like to know his name. What are you called, old chap, and who are your friends?"

"Wal, stranger, you may call me Jerry, ef you like. That man on the log, with the powerful long nose, is called Jim Barney, and t'other one on the log, with the cut under his eye, is Sam Stiles, though he's ginerally known as Jerks, 'long of his havin' took 'em so bad onc't, at a Methodiss meetin'. The gen'leman you was speakin' to is Mister Boyd, and he is only second to Ben Bandy the Boss Pard himself, when it comes to—"

"What are you talking about, Jerry Haines?" thundered the deep voice of Boyd.

"Nothin' sea'cely, Mister Boyd. Come up boys, all of you; this stranger is goin' to treat."

Tin cups were produced, and all the men stepped up to the barrel, with the exception of Father Higbie, who sat on a log, and groaned audibly. The woman in the corner looked wistfully at the tin cups and the barrel, and made an effort to rise, but the exertion was too much for her, and she fell back in a drunken stupor.

When the drinking was finished, Jerry set out on the puncheon-table some cold venison on a large wooden platter, together with some corn-bread that was about as hard as a stone. Desirous of pleasing the stranger who had "treated" so liberally, he also produced some bacon, and rolled up a log for the travelers to sit upon.

Father Higbie said a long but fervent "grace," which brought a sardonic sneer from Boyd, and a smothered laugh from his companions, and the two commenced to "pitch into" the provision like hungry men. Starling, like a true borderer, made himself at home, warmed his venison at the fire, split open his corn-dodgers, and toasted his bacon, letting it drip upon the bread. The preacher followed his example, and the friends made a supper that was substantial, if not delicate, and that seemed to put new life into both of them.

When they had finished their meal, Starling filled and lighted his pipe, and Father Higbie, taking a large Bible out of his capacious saddle-bags, requested permission to read and pray with "the family."

"No, you don't, old chap," said Jerry Haines, to whom he had addressed himself. "None of your psalm-singin' and cantin' and shoutin'

about here, ef I know it, and ef you try to cut up any sech capers, you'll be pitched outen this shanty quicker'n lightnin'. It's gittin' late and we're all goin' to take another drink and go to sleep, and ef you know what's good for you, you'll do the same."

"It has always been my custom," persisted the preacher, appealing to Boyd.

"You had better put up your books and your spectacles," answered Boyd, with his sarcastic smile, "for we want none of your methodistical palaver. I am a belated traveler like yourself, and I know that it is getting late, and I mean to lie down to rest very soon. I am sure that none of us wish to be disturbed by your caterwauling."

"Come, Father Higbie," said young Starling, as he rose with a gay laugh; "these people are impracticable. Let us go out and look at our horses. I am bound that mine shall have a good meal, if there is any provender to be had."

With a sigh, the preacher returned his Bible to the saddle-bags and his spectacles to their case, and followed his young friend to the out-house where the horses had been left. A brief inspection satisfied them that the animals were well cared for, as each had his nose in a bag of corn, which he was munching very contentedly.

"Wicked as these people are, they take as good care of our horses as if they were their own," said Father Higbie, as they returned.

"Perhaps they mean to make them so," muttered Starling, shrugging his shoulders suspiciously.

When they re-entered the cabin, all its occupants were rolled up in blankets on the floor, with the exception of Jerry Haines, who gave them a couple of buffalo-robés, which he pulled out, without ceremony, from under his drunken wife.

"Here's your kiver, strangers," said he, "and you may sleep in t'other part of the cabin. Me and my old woman ginerally turn in thar, but she don't feel much like movin' jest now, and I allowed I'd give it up to you to-night. You can take that thar light with you, and may go as soon as you want to. Have suthin' to drink afore you go?"

This offer was declined, and the travelers, gathering up their overcoats and saddle-bags, went out-doors to the other part of the cabin, as there was no entrance through the log-partition. They found this room similar to the first, except that it had no furniture of any kind, and no fire in the fireplace.

Starling stuck in a chink of the wall the pointed iron rod that held the saucer of grease. They then spread their buffalo-robés on the ground, wrapped themselves in their overcoats, and prepared to seek repose.

"I was astonished and grieved, my young friend," said Father Higbie, before he laid down, "to hear you invite those men to drink, and to see you join them in partaking of that detestable, soul-and-body-destroying stuff which they call whisky."

"Don't talk so loud," replied the young man, "for I had rather they would not hear us. When we are in Rome we must do as the Romans do, and I thought it good policy to try to get on the right side of those fellows, who

may be able to do us a great deal of harm, if they are not willing to do us any good."

"It is never safe to stray from the path of truth and right. Your policy is a time-serving and self-deluding policy, and all such are sure to fail in the end."

"I have my suspicions of those men, and I would like to know who they are," replied Ned.

The preacher sighed as he laid down on his buffalo-robe, and was soon sleeping as tranquilly as an infant. Starling, on the contrary, tired as he was, felt restless and uneasy, and rolled and tossed about upon his hard bed, without being able to obtain the wished-for repose. He had made his couch by the side of the log-partition, and, as he lay there, sleepless and nervous, his quick ear caught the sound of voices, in whispered conversation in the next room. He at once recognized the voices as those of Boyd and Jerry Haines, and, as he listened eagerly, he contrived to catch some such sentences as the following:

"The big one is nothin' but a cantin' and howlin' Methodiss preacher," said Jerry, "and in course he hain't got nothin' but his clothes and books; but I reckon the young chap has got money, and we'll have to go through him."

"Hasn't it struck you, Jerry," responded Boyd, "that they may be a couple of spies? What else should bring them to such a place as this? Here is no thoroughfare, and they might easily have taken a good route to reach the river. They seem fair enough on the surface, but I've seen a heap of that sort of thing. The Boss can disguise himself so that his own wife wouldn't know him. I reckon it will be best to keep them until he comes."

"Don't you think he'll be here to-morrow?"

"He would hardly attempt to cross the river in such a storm, and there seems to be no let-up to it. To-morrow is only the fourth, you know. He will be here on the fifth, if he lives."

"I'll jest bet my life that that young chap—"

"H-sh-sh—he might hear us. Leave the affair to me, and—"

"Shall I fix up the—"

"No, no violence—wait till the boss—"

The young man heard nothing more that was intelligible, but he heard enough to confirm his suspicions that he was in a den of thieves, and to assure him that his property and his life were not safe in that place. He at first resolved to awaken his companion, and acquaint him with the facts, so that they might steal out and escape while the conspirators slept; but, he shuddered as he thought of the fearful storm that was raging. He was very weary, and refused to leave his place of shelter and again encounter the fury of the elements. Besides, he had a strong curiosity to ascertain who and what those men were, and he thought he could trust in himself as he had done in many emergencies. As he revolved these matters in his mind, exhausted nature was overcome by drowsiness, and, without intending to do so, he fell asleep.

He was awakened, early in the morning, by a rude shaking, and started up to find himself in the custody of Boyd and Jerry Haines, who had already secured his legs with a slipnoose. He felt for his pistol, but it had been removed, and at the same time his arms were seized by the

conspirators, and tightly bound behind his back before he could offer any resistance.

Looking around, he saw the Plucky Parson struggling with two of the ruffians, who found it was no easy task to master him. Indeed, he had almost shaken them off, when Jerry Haines, leaving Starling in charge of Boyd, went to their assistance, and the joint efforts of the three overcame the resistance of stout Father Higbie, who was bound in the same manner as his young friend.

CHAPTER III.

THE BOSS PARD.

YOUNG Starling bore his captivity with coolness and equanimity, knowing that he could not help himself, and Father Higbie warmly protested against the indignity that was offered to a minister of the gospel.

They were taken into the other room and searched, but the robbers found little booty to reward them for their pains, as Starling had concealed the greater part of his money in the soles of his boots and in the lining of his coat. From the preacher they got only a few dollars—all he had—and from his young companion they took about fifty dollars, in gold and silver. They would have robbed the latter of his clothing if they had not been restrained by Boyd, who said something to them about the "boss," and both were permitted to retain their wearing apparel.

After this operation was performed, a warm breakfast, of broiled venison and corn-cakes, was set out on the puncheon-table, the arms of the prisoners were unbound, and they were allowed to eat with the rest. They did as full justice to the meal as if they were neither in danger nor in durance; Ned Starling having never known what fear was, was only displeased at being delayed on his journey to Tennessee.

The arms of the captives were again bound, and they were informed that they must be blindfolded. To this they submitted patiently, and were then led out of the cabin, through the storm, to the edge of the lake, placed in a large canoe, and paddled across to an island in the middle of this sheet of water, which might properly be called the very heart of the great morass.

The island was a small one, and was nearly covered with cane, mingled with tall trees and a dense growth of tangled underbrush. In the center rose a lofty cottonwood, sufficiently gigantic and striking in appearance to serve as a landmark for miles around.

Through the almost impassable natural obstructions the travelers were led, by a devious and labyrinthine path, until they had passed a large log cabin, and reached a smaller one, into which they were thrust rather unceremoniously, and the door was closed and bolted behind them. A fire was kindled on the hearth, which soon filled the cabin with warmth and a cheerful gleam, and then the prisoners were unbound and unbandaged.

When their eyes became accustomed to the bright light of the fire, they saw that they were in a small and unfurnished room, similar in all respects, except in size, to that in which they had passed the night on the border of the lake.

Before them stood Boyd and the man who was nicknamed Jerks.

Starling's first thought was, whether he and his friend might not be able to master those two men, bind them as they had themselves been bound, and make their escape from the cabin. He observed, however, that they were both well armed, while his weapons had been taken from him. He felt that he could not rely upon the preacher for aid, as his calling would naturally dispose him to be a non-combatant, and the undertaking was entirely too desperate for him to venture on it alone.

Boyd evidently divined the thoughts that were passing in his mind, for he said, with a pleasant smile:

"If you are thinking of resistance, young man, it is my duty to tell you it would be vain to attempt it. We are well armed, as you see, while you are defenseless, and a single whistle would bring fifty men to my assistance. In an encounter with us, you would gain nothing, and might possibly lose your life."

"I see that you have the advantage of us, most decidedly," replied Starling, with a good-humored laugh. "For my part, I expect to submit to my fate with the best grace I can, and shall not attempt to struggle against such odds. I only wish to ask you why you have made us prisoners, and for what purpose you are detaining us here."

"Your empty pockets might answer a part of your question. We supposed that we would find more money upon you. A man of your appearance surely ought to have more than fifty dollars about him."

"I have told you that I seldom carry upon my person more money than is necessary for my traveling expenses. As you have relieved us of what we had, I should think we might be allowed to go our way, and I am anxious to know why we are detained."

"You will have a visitor to-morrow, who will explain the matter to you, if he chooses to do so. You are detained to await his pleasure. For my part, I have nothing to say about it."

"Will our horses be returned to us? Are they still at the cabin where we slept last night?"

"They are in a safe place, and it is not likely that you will ever see them again. You may as well drop this subject, for I shall answer no more questions."

In a short time, Jerry Haines and his wife arrived at the cabin, with some provisions, followed by some men with some blankets and the inevitable barrel of whisky. Boyd then left, advising the two prisoners to make themselves comfortable while they could.

Haines's wife, under directions from Boyd, immediately set to work to prepare dinner, and the travelers did not neglect to do justice to it, though it still consisted of nothing but broiled venison and corn-cakes. They seemed disposed to obey Boyd's injunction, and to make themselves as comfortable as they could under the circumstances.

The storm continued to rage with great violence during the day, only abating a little at nightfall, and the two friends were glad that they were sheltered from its fury, although they were more securely housed than they could have

wished. Haines and his wife paid strict attention to the whisky-barrel, and the woman was so rapidly "waking up the old drunk" of the previous night, that her husband was obliged to interdict her potations, and to refuse her access to the barrel.

After supper, the captives concluded that there was nothing for it but to retire to rest, and they prepared to do so.

Peacefully and soundly slept the captive travelers, that night, and when they awoke in the morning, they found that the storm had ceased, although the sky was still overclouded, and a few flakes of snow were yet falling.

The morning passed away slowly, Starling vainly endeavoring to draw the two male villains into conversation, and to gain some knowledge of who and what they were, and who was the dreaded "boss," whom he had heard spoken of so frequently. He had no doubt that these men formed part of a gang of lawless desperadoes, and he believed he was at the headquarters of a large and organized band of such. If he could obtain proof of this, and could learn who were their leaders, and what were their objects, he felt that the benefits he could confer upon society, would well compensate him for a temporary imprisonment. But he found it impossible to extract any information from Jerry and Jerks, who had evidently been instructed by Boyd, and who maintained a dogged silence on any subject connected with themselves.

A short time before dinner an unusual commotion was heard without, apparently in the direction of the large log-house, accompanied by cheers and shouts. Starling noticed the two ruffians looking at each other, and heard Jerry whisper:

"The Boss has come now, fer sure."

Dinner was over, and the afternoon had nearly dwindled away into evening, when a tall, finely-formed and well-dressed man, Ben Bandy, the Boss, with a black mask on his face, entered the cabin. Casting a rapid glance upon its inmates, he stepped up to Ned and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"Would you like to take a short walk with me, young man?" he said, in a voice of peculiar richness and melody.

"Thank you," frankly answered Starling; "it would give me great pleasure. I am not accustomed to being cooped up in the house, and I long to stretch my limbs and breathe the fresh air."

"Come with me, then. Never mind your old preacher; I don't want him."

The Boss Pard led the way, and Starling followed him out into the open air. He noticed that the sky was clear again, that the ground was covered with snow, and that right in front of him was a large log-house, which he had not previously noticed, as he had been blindfolded when he passed it on the way to his prison. Several men were collected around the door of this building, and the sound of voices could be heard within it. Starling's conductor led him away to the left, by a narrow and secluded path, through the underbrush and among the tall trees.

"We are alone here, as you see," said Ben Bandy, as he slackened his steps; "but I warn

you that it is useless for you to attempt to escape, as I am armed, and I have more personal strength than two such men as you. Besides, you are surrounded by my pards."

"You need not apprehend that I will attempt anything desperate," gayly replied the young man. "I own that my detention here is unpleasant, but I do not imagine that there is anything serious about it, and I have made up my mind to submit as cheerfully as possible. I have been knocked about the world enough to have learned how to take my fate as it comes."

"You are quite young, to have seen much of the world. From what part of the country do you come?" asked Ben Bandy.

"I have been in Texas during the past four years."

"In Texas! That is a wild and lawless country, as I understand, and it is said to be the general refuge of all the scamps and criminals from the States. I suppose you would object to being classed among such."

"Perhaps I might. I cannot count myself among those who have left their country for their country's good, but I have been hail-fellow-well-met with all kinds and classes of people, and have never been ashamed of it. Every man to his business, say I. I attend to my own affairs, and interfere with none."

"As you have lived in Texas so long, you must have learned some easy ways of making money."

"Yes," answered Ned, in a hesitating manner. "I have learned a great deal, but have not been able to put it in practice as well as I could wish. Texas is a poor country, as yet, and there is little money to be made there. There are plenty of cattle, it is true, but they are hardly worth more than their hide and tallow."

"You admit, then, that you have lived on the fat herds occasionally," said the Boss.

"I admit nothing. I have always been an industrious young man, and if I have made any money, it is my own business how it was made."

"You seem to be a lad of spirit and enterprise, and I am glad that I have met you," said the mask, evidently well pleased at having found a congenial companion.

"And I am glad that I have fallen in with you, although the mode of introduction has not been a very pleasant one, for I like your style of talking. Am I mistaken in supposing that you are the man whom I have heard spoken of about here as 'the Boss'?"

"You are not, and you may call me so, if you wish, though I do not admire the title," chimed in the Boss Pard. "I am sure that I am not mistaken in supposing that you thought us a gang of thieves."

"It certainly seemed so, this morning, when I was tied up, and relieved of the small sum of money I had with me."

"Perhaps you were right, and perhaps the business pays well, though it is plain that there is not much to be made in fleecing such fellows as you and that poverty-stricken old parson."

"My horse was of some value, at all events. Can you inform me whether I will be allowed to take it with me when I leave—that is, if I am permitted to leave?"

"I hope you will not be in a hurry to leave us, my dear sir, for I would like to see more of you, and to speak with you more freely at some future time. In what direction were you traveling?"

"I was going to Madison county, in the State of Tennessee," replied the young man, who hoped, by frankness on this point, to ingratiate himself yet more with his masked companion. "The truth is, and I make no secret of it, that I expect to marry and settle there. It is a long time since I have seen the young lady to whom I am engaged, but I am sure that she is waiting for me, and I hope that it will not be many months before I am made happy."

"She is of a respectable family, I presume," said Bandy.

"None better in the county. It will not be the first time that a man who lives by his wits has married into a highly respectable family."

"What is her name?"

"Mary Maynard."

The Boss Pard gave a slight start, and his voice and manner suddenly changed.

"Do you know the family?" inquired Starling. "If you do, I hope you will not betray to them anything that I may have told you."

"I am slightly acquainted with them. As for betraying you, there is nothing to betray, and if there was, you might safely trust me with all your secrets. What is your name?"

"Edward Starling."

"Let us return to the cabin, Mr. Starling. It is getting late, and there are some men waiting for me yonder. I must be absent for a few days, and I would like you to remain here in the mean time, as I wish to have some further conversation with you. I hope a man of your mettle will not object to being placed under a slight restraint for a short time."

The young man made no objection, as he knew that it would be idle to do so, and was conducted back into the cabin. Ben Bandy whispered a few words to Jerry Haines, and then took his leave, shaking hands with Starling as he bid them good-by.

CHAPTER IV.

ESCAPED FROM THE ISLAND.

FATHER HIGBIE was anxious to learn from Starling the nature of his interview with the masked individual who had taken him out for a walk; but the young man judged it best not to reveal anything to him at that time, and contented himself with saying that there seemed to be no present prospect of their release.

After supper, Ned Starling, relying on his supposed familiarity with "the Boss," and the friendly manner in which that worthy had spoken to him, ordered Jerry Haines to open the door, saying that he wanted to go out and take another walk.

"No you don't, mister," said Jerry, winking and grinning.

"What do you mean, you rascal? I want to go out and have another talk with the Boss. I only came in to supper, and he wants to see me again."

"You can't make that go down, sharp as you are. The Boss has gone away, with most of the other men, and he left partic'lar orders that you

wasn't to be let outer this room 'cept under guard of me or Jerks."

"The deuce he did! That's a pretty way to treat a friend. When will he return?"

"Can't say."

"He told me that he expected to be absent for a few days but I had no idea that he meant to go so soon."

The young man was forced to swallow his chagrin, although it cost him a wry face, and he was rather pleased than otherwise when his attention was called off by Father Higbie, who took him into a corner of the room, and spoke to him privately.

"I am afraid, my dear young friend," said the preacher, "that you are still striving to make friends with the mammon of unrighteousness. The path of duplicity is a crooked one, and they who travel therein are apt to lose their way. But I will not chide you at present. We will now join in prayer, my son, for I have faith to believe that the Lord will this night convert the souls of these wicked people."

The young man looked up in surprise, but the decided expression of Father Higbie's face, and the spiritual expression of his splendid dark eyes, convinced him that the preacher meant and firmly believed what he said, and he almost felt inspired with the same confidence.

"I am afraid it will take a stout crowbar to move that rock," he ventured to say.

The two friends knelt, and Father Higbie offered up a brief prayer, and commenced to exhort, in the real old-fashioned, backwoods Methodist style.

Starling was at first astonished at the veteran preacher's power of thought and richness of imagery, as well as at his homely but forcible language, which seemed to go right to the hearts of his hearers; but his astonishment was soon changed to a feeling of awe and intense interest as the speaker warmed up with his subject.

The effect of the exhortation was soon manifest in the audience. The ruffianly men and the brutal woman at first sneered, laughed, whistled, shuffled their feet, and used other devices to distract their own attention from the eloquent old man; but all their efforts were in vain, for he held them with his eye and voice, until they sat spellbound, fixed in their seats, and drinking in every word with the most rapt attention.

As the plucky parson progressed, and grew more earnest and eloquent, the man nicknamed Jerks was suddenly seized with a convulsive twitching of his limbs, which soon communicated itself to his head, and thence to his whole body, until he twitched and jerked so violently, that it seemed as if he must fall to pieces. It was in vain that he endeavored to stop the violent motion, for the influence was on him, and the more he tried to get rid of it, the harder he jerked. The contagion spread to Jerry Haines, who was soon in as bad a predicament as his comrade, and then the woman was taken with the "jerks," and all three twitched and jerked together, in a manner that would have seemed irresistibly comical to young Starling, if it had not been for the deep interest that he took in the preacher and his exhortation.

When these manifestations became apparent,

Father Higbie's words increased in power and fervor, and then Haines's wife, with a shrill shriek, leaped up into the air, and fell prostrate on the floor, as if in a swoon. Still the preacher exhorted, with all his earnestness and power, as if he was addressing a whole camp-meeting. Jerry Haines soon followed the example of his wife, and he was followed by Jerks, and there all three lay, without motion, and seemingly without sense, prone on the earthen floor.

"What does this mean?" thought Starling, as he gazed in wonder at the strange spectacle. "What sort of jugglery can it be? Is it mesmerism, or is it undue excitement?"

It was not long before Haines's wife sprung to her feet, her eyes rolling and her face beaming in an ecstasy of delight, and commenced shouting, at the top of her voice, "Glory to God! glory to God!"

"Shout on, sister!" exclaimed the parson. "Shout on! you have found the blessing!"

The example was again contagious. Jerks bounded up from the ground like a ball, repeating the same cry in his heavy base voice, and was followed by Jerry Haines, in a screaming tenor. After this had continued for some time, they all knelt together, and Father Higbie again offered prayer, with as much fervor as previously, but with more mildness of manner and expression.

When the prayer was ended, the two men and the woman embraced each other, and then seated themselves on a log, looking so mild, so docile, and so happy, that young Starling could hardly conceive them to be the same brutal beings who had been acting as the jailers of himself and his friend.

"What shall we do?" asked the trio, in chorus.

"You have gained the blessing, and now it remains to prove your faith by your works. Roll that whisky-barrel out of the door, and knock the head in!" said the plucky parson.

Hardly were the words out of his mouth, when the two men rushed upon the barrel, hustled it out of the door, which was held open by the woman, and stove in the head with an ax, allowing the spirituous contents to run upon the snow-covered ground. Then they returned into the cabin, and resumed their seats.

"We have cast the devil out of that barrel," said Father Higbie, "and now you must tell me who and what are the men who have captured us, maltreated and robbed us. What has been going on here? What work of wickedness is the devil doing in this lonely and deserted place? Brother Haines, I call upon you for a full reply.

Jerry looked around at his companions, cleared his throat, and spoke as he was ordered to, with a rueful countenance:

"Touchin' the chaps as took you and robbed you, we are some of 'em, and you can judge what the others war. We hope God has forgiven us for that thing, and we reckon you won't be much behind him. The goin's on here to-day was the meetin' of the Grand Council of the Arkansas, which is jest the biggest clan of robbers, hoss-thieves and murderers, that was ever known on this earth."

Starling shuddered, but Father Higbie con-

tinued his questioning, speaking calmly and impressively.

"Who is the leader of this clan, as you call it, and where does he dwell?"

"You musn't ask me that. I beg you won't ask me that, fur I've swore a most orful oath, and I don't dare to tell his name. He is our boss, pard, and the young gen'leman thar has been speakin' to him to-day."

"I will know him, if I ever meet him again, in spite of his mask," said Ned. "He has a voice that is not easily forgotten."

"A wicked oath is better broken than kept," continued the parson; "but I will not press you against your conscience. Can you guide us safely from this place, to a point at which we can cross the river, and are you willing to do so?"

"I will do that for you, and will be thankful for the privilege," interposed Jerks. "I ought to try to do a little good, arter bein' sinful so long. Jerry here has got his wife to look arter, and both of 'em will have to be gittin' away from this place when you leave."

"That is right," said the preacher. "We will accept your guidance, brother Styles, but I must first ask you whether you can procure the return of our horses?"

"Mighty sorry to say it, sir, but I can't do that, 'cause they've already been taken off by the Boss and another chap. We'll start right now, sir, if you please, bein' as we've got a long way to go, and as we'll have to circle around consid'able, to keep out the hands of those folks."

"We are ready," answered the parson, "and will start immediately."

Ned ripped a hole in the lining of his coat, and took out two twenty-dollar gold-pieces, which he gave to Haines and his wife. They refused to take the money, but he pressed it upon them, telling them that they would need it in their flight from the marauders' island.

"Take it," said father Higbie. "Take it, and flee from this accursed spot."

The two travelers put on their overcoats, slung their saddle-bags over their shoulders, and followed Jerks out of the cabin. He led them by a different route from that by which they had come, and a more difficult one; but the night was clear, so that they made good progress, and at the end of the route they found a canoe, in which the ex-ruffian ferried them over to the other side.

Perfectly acquainted with the country, he piloted them through cane-brakes, around swamps, and over sloughs, carefully avoiding the cabins, of which a few were scattered here and there, until they had crossed the great morass, and approached the bank of the Mississippi.

"Do you know where brother Hargons lives, on the other side of the river?" inquired the parson. "If you do, we had better get a boat from some of the wood-sellers on the banks, as I wish to tarry awhile at his house."

"I know whar he lives," answered Jerks; "but you musn't have anythin' to do with those wood-sellers. They do sell a little wood now and then, but they all belong to the Boss, and that is only put on for a blind. Never fear but I will find a boat for you."

At the bank of the river the guide drew a small canoe out from under the bushes, and launched it down the muddy and slippery bank.

"You needn't think I stole that thar boat," said he, "'cause I made it, and it belongs to me, and you're welcome to it, and I hope you'll remember this poor sinner in your prayers."

Father Higbie, in the most earnest manner, implored a blessing upon the repentant robber, Ned Starling pressed upon him a twenty-dollar gold-piece, and the two friends were afloat on turbid waters of the Mississippi.

"We have, indeed, made a most fortunate escape," said the young man, as he settled himself down to the oars. "To me it seems as wonderful as it was unexpected, and I confess that I cannot understand it."

"This ought to silence your skepticism, and convince you of the folly of your time-serving, self-deluding policy of making compromises with iniquity," solemnly answered the preacher.

In due time they reached the Tennessee shore, and found their way to the house of the clergyman, Mr. Hargons, where they were cordially received and hospitably entertained. They both judged it best to keep silence for the present on the subject of their discoveries in the swamp, though they told their host that they had been robbed of their horses and the money in their pockets.

Starling purchased two good horses, one of which he presented to the plucky parson, and set out on his journey to Madison county and his lady-love, parting from the preacher with many expressions of friendship, and hope that they might meet again.

CHAPTER V.

PARTNERS IN CRIME.

WE must carry the reader back to a period about two weeks previous to the events recorded in the last chapter.

John Maynard was a well-to-do farmer in Madison county, Tennessee. In fact he was regarded as more than well-to-do, for he was considered quite wealthy for that time and place, being the owner of a fine farm, together with an abundance of stock, and valuable tracts of wild land, and possessing, according to common belief, a fabulous amount of gold and silver, which he was supposed to have discreetly hidden in his cellar. He had passed the meridian of life and had been a widower for several years, having been left with only one child, his daughter Mary.

Mary Maynard was in her twenty-first year, and was not only beautiful, but very intelligent, and of a pleasant and very amiable disposition. These qualities, and her brilliant pecuniary prospects, secured her many suitors, but she had given away her heart to dashing Ned Starling, before her father emigrated to Tennessee, and before Ned started to seek adventure in Texas.

Mary was the natural heir to her father's estate, and after her, the next of kin was his brother Samuel who occupied a small farm in the same neighborhood.

Samuel was a few years younger than his brother John, and was entirely different from

him; for, while John was kind-hearted, generous, and popular with the whole community, Samuel was crusty, stingy, avaricious, and invariably disliked.

John had succeeded well in the world, and everything he put his hands to seemed to prosper; while Samuel was notorious for failure in all his undertakings, and had been gradually going down-hill, until he had become so poor that his numerous family was chiefly supported by his brother's bounty.

It is possible that Samuel Maynard might have succeeded better, if he had confined himself to one business, and had bestowed proper attention upon his farm; but he was given to "trading," especially in horses, and always had so many irons of speculation in the fire, that his legitimate affairs were neglected and went to ruin. In the fallen state of his fortunes, it was to be expected that he should look with longing eyes upon his brother's fine property, and wish that it was his.

In spite of the injunction of the tenth commandment, he coveted not only John Maynard's house, but his lands, his stock, and the heaps of hard cash with which he was credited by rumor. Between him and all those riches stood only one person, John Maynard's daughter, and, to speak plainly, he most heartily wished that she was out of the way.

She was only a girl, he thought, and could never rightly appreciate such a property, but would marry some graceless young spendthrift, so that the estate would be taken "out of the family," and scattered to the dogs; whereas, if she would only die, it would fall to him, who really ought to be heir, and to whom it would be a substantial benefit.

But Mary Maynard persisted in living, and in continuing strong and healthy, in spite of the wishes of her uncle, who had already, more than once, committed murder in his heart.

Samuel Maynard was encouraged in these ideas by his wife, a weak-minded, vain and ill-tempered woman, who was continually clamoring for money, and was always dissatisfied.

True, he placed no confidence in her judgment, and paid little attention to what she said, as a general thing; but in this respect her views chimed in so exactly with his own, and she was constantly "ding-donging" in his ears the old story of his brother's riches, and "that girl" who obstructed his way to wealth and position, that he never had a cross word with her when the subject was discussed between them.

During these conversations, he often became so excited and "worked up," that he openly declared he wished the girl was dead, and that he had more than half a mind to contrive some way to get rid of her.

It was in such a mind that he mounted his horse, one November evening, and rode over to his brother's house. While tying his beast to the gate, he contrived to smooth down his ruffled countenance, if not his ruffled feelings, and when he entered the door his face was beaming with smiles, and his greetings were cordial and apparently full of affection.

He found his brother John lying in his bed, suffering from a severe attack of sickness, and too weak to rise. Mary was sitting by his bed-

side, reading a letter, and looking even more beautiful and blooming than usual.

Samuel at once saw that her father was very sick, but he could read no sign of ill-health in Mary Maynard's radiant countenance. He approached his brother with expressions of deep concern, and inquired into his symptoms as if he felt the greatest desire for his speedy recovery.

"I am glad you have come, Samuel," said John Maynard, "for I wished to ask you to ride over occasionally and look after matters on the farm a little for a few days, until I get well enough to be about again."

"I shall be happy to do so, brother," answered Samuel, "though I have a speculation on hand that ought to take me up into Kentucky."

"I will pay you better than your speculations would, I am sure, especially as they always turn out losing affairs. To begin with, I lately heard your wife say that she wanted a good riding-horse. She couldn't find a better one than my bay mare with the white forefoot. Take her home with you when you go, brother, as a present from me to Jane."

"Perhaps I had better bring my wife or my eldest daughter over here, to help Mary take care of the house."

"Oh, no; there will be no necessity for that. Our servants are all faithful and well-instructed, and Mary can manage them easily enough, unless she goes crazy over the news she has received, as I am almost afraid she will."

"What wonderful news can it be, that would have such an effect upon her strong mind?"

"She has had a letter from Texas. It came by way of New Orleans."

"From Texas?"

"Yes; from her lover, or, perhaps I should say, from her intended husband. Is it not so, Mary?"

Mary blushed deeply, and cast down her eyes, which was a sufficient reply to the question.

"I thought you knew all about it," continued John Maynard. "Of course you remember the young man—Edward Starling, who used to live near us in Ohio—son of Colonel Starling. He joined the army, and was sent to Texas, but before he went he was betrothed to Mary. It is seldom that they have heard from each other during the past four years, but they seem to have been more constant than most young lovers. I have bought a fine farm for him, acting as his agent, and he now writes me that he is coming here to marry my child, and to settle down on his farm, and she appears to think that whatever the saucy young fellow says must be done."

"I was not aware that Mary had ever favored any of her lovers. I now see why she has treated the beaux of Madison county so coldly. I am told that Texas is a very wicked country, the general refuge of outlaws and fugitives from justice in the States. I hope that the young man has not contracted any bad habits while he has been there."

"I have no fear of that, Samuel. A more honest and open-hearted boy I never saw, and I would as soon think of my Mollie turning out badly, as Ned Starling."

"Nevertheless, it would be nothing more than prudent to make some inquiries concerning his

character, before intrusting him with such a precious treasure as your daughter, and the valuable property which she will come into at your death."

"If I consider it necessary, I shall do so; but I have seldom failed in my judgment of men, and I had rather trust my own observation than anybody's certificate of character. Starling writes that he expects to be with us before Christmas, and I am glad he is coming so soon, for I feel, Samuel, that I am not long for this world. I have a disease of the heart, by which I may be taken away at any moment, and I am anxious to see Mary comfortably and happily settled in the world before I leave it."

"There can't be any danger of her coming to want."

"I suppose not, as I have settled on her all my property, with the exception of what I have left to you, which is no small matter, I assure you. What I chiefly wish is, to see her married to a good husband, a kind, loving, and honorable man, upon whom she can depend for protection when her old father is gone. I believe that Ned Starling is just such a man."

"If I remember rightly, he was a blue-eyed and light-haired boy, rather slenderly built."

"Yes; he was a handsome fellow when I saw him last, and slim as a sapling, as I used to tell him; but I suppose he has filled out now, though he was not made for a large man."

"Is it certain that he will come by Christmas?"

"He writes that he hopes to be here early in December, and that he will arrive before Christmas, without fail. He may be delayed, as he is coming across the country, through Arkansas, and bad weather is at hand, but I suppose he has made his calculations accordingly."

"My fair niece must allow me to congratulate her on her approaching happiness, and to wish that nothing may occur to cast a blight upon her brilliant prospects," said Samuel Maynard, with an oily smile, as he took Mary's hand and kissed it.

Mary, who felt a strong repugnance toward her uncle, thanked him coldly, and he took his hat to leave.

"Don't forget the bay mare, and be sure to come over in the morning," said John, as his brother bowed himself out of the door. When Samuel Maynard was fairly out of the house, his countenance quickly changed, and it could easily be seen that he was very angry. His smooth, placid, and unctuous expression passed away in an instant, and baslid avarice, rage, hate, revenge, and possibly something worse, were plainly painted on his face. He shook his fist at the lighted window of the room in which the sick man lay, and gave vent to an ejaculation that sounded much like an oath.

"They have fixed the matter up nicely between them," he muttered. "They have made fine arrangements to swindle me out of what is justly my due. If they should carry out their plans, and that girl should marry, farewell to all my chances! I and my family might starve under their noses, for all they would care. I have found out their plot in good time, and I will foil them, as sure as my name is Samuel Maynard."

I have been thinking, for a long time, that it must come to this, and now, at last, I have fully made up my mind. I know what to do, and there shall be no delay in carrying my plans into execution."

He did not take the bay mare that night, knowing that he could get the animal at any time, nor did he go in the direction of his home; but, digging his spurs savagely into the sides of his horse, he galloped furiously down the road, until he halted in front of a substantial farmhouse.

Here he tied his horse to the fence, and went up to the door, at which he knocked in a loud and impatient manner. It was opened by a care-worn, but still handsome woman who at once recognized him.

"Is Ben Bandy at home?" asked Samuel.

"He is. Walk in, Mr. Maynard, and you will find him in the parlor."

Maynard followed the woman, who ushered him into the presence of a tall, well-formed, and fine-looking man, who was writing at a table. This person rose, and received his visitor with great politeness and affability.

"I am truly glad to see you, friend Maynard," said the Boss Pard, who was then beginning to be suspected and watched in the neighborhood, "for I felt lonesome, and wanted some one to whom I could speak freely. But you seem flustered and excited. What is the matter with you to-night?"

"Matter enough—not to be short about it. I am angry, and have good reason to be. What is the news with you?"

"Nothing in particular. I have been busy settling accounts with some of my kind friends of Captain Slick's company, who wanted to drive me out of the country. I am inclined to believe that they will think it advisable to let me alone hereafter. In a few days I must go to attend the session of our Grand Council which meets on the fifth of December. When I return, I will have some news to tell you. What are you angry about, Maynard? Is there anything that I can do for you?"

"There is, indeed. You know my brother John?"

"I do, and I have a grudge against him, which I must attend to when I get time."

"I will show you a chance to get even with him. You can revenge yourself, and help me at the same time."

"Speak plainly, and tell me all about it," said Ben Bandy.

"John has made his will, giving nearly all his property to that high-stepping minx, his daughter, and leaving me only some miserable legacies. It is not likely that he will live long, and she is his only child. It seems too bad that that girl should stand between me and such a splendid property, and I have often thought that I owed it to myself and my family to do something about it. If he should die and leave her alone, I think I might manage the matter without much trouble; but I have just learned that she is engaged to be married, that her lover is to be here before Christmas, and that the marriage will take place soon after his arrival."

"That is rather hard upon you, friend May-

nard. What do you propose to do about it, or what do you wish to be done?"

"It seems to me that if the young man should not be able to find her when he comes here, he would not be likely to marry her."

"Very true; it takes two to make a marriage. And if her father should die, and her absence should prove to be a long one, the property would come to you. That is a very sensible idea of yours, but it involves the necessary of getting rid of the girl."

"Precisely what I mean."

"Would you wish her to be completely got rid of—to be done away with entirely?"

"Well—no—not exactly that—I would not wish to commit murder, or to employ any one to commit murder; but—you know what I mean—I want her to be got out of the way, so that there will be no danger of her coming back to disturb me in my possessions. I have been thinking for a long time, that this ought to be done, and now I am satisfied that it must be done. If you will undertake the job for me, and will carry it through, I will give you ten thousand dollars when I get the property, and will do better by you if the estate cuts up well."

"I understand you, and think it can be easily managed. Perhaps it may be well to look after the young man, also, and to keep him quiet for a while. Who is he, and where is he coming from?" queried the Boss.

"His name is Edward Starling, and he is coming from Texas by way of Arkansas."

Maynard then gave the marauder as good a description as he was able to of the personal appearance and characteristics of Ned Starling.

"That will do," said Ben Bandy. "Leave the whole matter with me, and I think you may rest easy on the subject. When are you going up into Kentucky to dispose of those horses Davis stole in Mississippi?"

"I am afraid I sha'n't be able to go, as my brother is very sick, and wants me to look after his farm for a while."

"Very well; I can easily send some one else, as it is not a difficult business. I assure you that I will attend to your affair in the best way and in the shortest time possible."

The partners in crime separated, and Maynard rode home to his wife, to open his budget of startling news, and to tell her of the plan he had formed of getting possession of his brother's property.

CHAPTER VI.

NED'S SURPRISE

THE first week of December had gone into the past, and the second had nearly followed it, but Ned Starling had not yet reached Madison county, and nothing more had been heard from him.

Mary Maynard began to be disheartened, and grew restless, pale and drooping. It is true that she did not really have a right to expect him so soon, but she had hoped that he might arrive early in the month, and we all know that hope deferred maketh the heart sick. Her father tried to reason her out of her despondency, telling her that it was yet more than a fortnight before Christmas, that her lover had

probably been delayed by the bad weather, and that she ought not to be so easily discouraged; but Mary was not to be comforted, for a gloomy presentiment had taken possession of her mind, and she did not attempt to disguise her fear that something had happened to Starling.

John Maynard continued very ill, with little, if any, improvement in his condition. In fact, he had become so weak that he was unable to rise. As Mary was almost constantly with him, he had the best of care and attention; but he, as well as his daughter, was impatient for the arrival of Starling, and chased and fretted so much, that his symptoms were aggravated, and his recovery was delayed.

Samuel spent the greater part of his time at his brother's, taking care of the farm and attending to the sick man, and was so careful and assiduous in all his self-imposed duties, that he gained the commendations of John, and even won some little affection from his niece. He carried home the bay mare, and whatever else was given to him, together with many things to which he could lay no claim; but he was so kind and useful, that what he appropriated was not begrimed to him.

He took a great interest, apparently, in Mary and her lover, and sought to console her, saying that it was probable that he had found the journey, at that season of the year, much more difficult than he had expected, that there was yet an abundance of time for him to put in an appearance before Christmas, and that he might soon be expected, unless he had met with some accident on the route, or had been detained by sickness.

At the same time, he could not refrain from insinuations against the young man, condemning him for having excited undue expectations, and for raising hopes which he knew must be doomed to disappointment. In fact, he was one of Job's comforters, and his attempts at consolation only increased the trouble of the poor girl, who grew more despondent and uneasy after every interview with her uncle.

On one occasion, he went so far as to say that he had had a remarkable dream, in which he saw young Starling in a wretched cabin, stretched on a bed of sickness, and writing a letter to Mary. She was so distressed by the relation of this dream, that she remained in tears during the greater part of the day.

The fulfillment of this wonderful dream (if it was a dream) came to pass the day after he had made it known. He was seated in his brother's room, conversing with the sick man, and Mary was in her usual place by the bedside, reading the letter from Starling which had been read so many times, when a man rode up to the house, and knocked at the door. Samuel Maynard went to open it, and soon returned, bringing a letter for Mary, which, as he said, had been left by the horseman.

Mary took the letter, recognized the handwriting, and opened it eagerly; but she had read only a few lines when she uttered a shriek, and fell upon the floor in a swoon.

Restoratives were applied, and she soon recovered sufficiently to give the letter to her father, and to resume her seat.

There was a look of intense anguish on John

Maynard's face as he read the missive, and a deep groan escaped his lips when he finished it, and handed it to his brother.

Samuel had hardly looked at the paper when he threw up his hands, and exclaimed:

"My dream is fulfilled! All that I saw and heard in my sleep has come to pass! I saw Ned Starling on a sick bed, writing a letter to Mary, beseeching her to come to him, and now it is all verified."

"Why, uncle," interposed Mary, who was now quite calm, though very pale, "you have hardly looked at the letter, and surely you can't have read it yet."

"I need only a glance of the eyes to master the contents of such an epistle, my dear niece. However, I will read it in full, and aloud, so that we may all plainly understand the facts of the case."

The letter was dated at some obscure wood-yard on the Mississippi, above Randolph, and read as follows:

"MY DEAR MARY:—I hoped to have been with you by this time, but fate has willed it otherwise. I contracted a very severe fever during my journey from Texas, and when I reached the river I found that I could not proceed any further, as I was too weak to mount my horse. I was forced to take refuge in the cabin of a poor wood cutter, who is willing to do all he can for me, but is not able to do much. I have no medical attendance and no nursing, and will die if I am left in this condition. If you love me, Mary, I pray you to come and help me. You can save my life if you come soon. You can easily hire some one to guide you to this place. The fever is dangerous, but not contagious. Give my love to your good old father, and come soon to

"Your own

"Ned."

"He must be very ill, indeed," said Mary, "for he is not a man who would ask for help unless he needed it badly. The handwriting, too, is so strange that I would hardly have known it. It is very different from the letter he wrote me from Texas. He must be very weak, and I am sure that he needs my help."

"Let me see the letter that you have in your hand, Mary," said her uncle. "There is, as you say, quite a difference between them, though I would not have noticed it unless my attention had been drawn to it. It is nothing more than the natural result of his sickness. I agree with you that he must be very ill, indeed. What do you propose to do, my dear?"

Mary might well have said, with Deslemona, "I do perceive here a divided duty;" but she was silent, as she looked, with an expression of pain and great sorrow, first at the letter which contained the bad news, and then at her sick father.

"I ought to go to him; it seems that I must go to him," she said, in a sad and pitiful tone; "but you are sick, father, and I cannot leave you. What shall I do? Can you give me any advice?"

"I know what you were going to say, my child," replied her father, "and I thank you for it; but I was just ready to tell you that you mustn't mind me, for I can get along well enough without you, though you are a great comfort and a pleasure to me. Your duty is plain—to go to Ned Starling, and take care of him until

he gets well enough to come home with you. He says that he has no medical attendance and no nursing, while I can have both, whether you are with me or not. The only difficulty will be to procure a proper companion, but I hope you can induce your Uncle Samuel to go with you, to show you the way and take care of you on the journey."

"I will need no inducement," warmly exclaimed her uncle, "for it gives me great pleasure to offer my services to my beloved niece. In such an emergency, I can easily forget my own interests, and lay aside my own occupations, if I can be of any service to her. I think your symptoms are favorable, brother, if you are not really getting better. I feel that there is no danger, therefore, in leaving you for a short time, especially as I shall tell my wife to come over and take charge of the house, and will give your overseer all necessary instructions concerning the management of the farm. If we find the young man very sick, I will leave Mary with him, and will return immediately; if not, I will wait until he is able to travel."

"I thank you, brother, and you may be assured that I will never forget your kindness," replied John Maynard. "You will find money in my desk. Take what you want, and I only ask you to set out as soon as possible."

Mary, also, with much feeling, thanked her uncle for his generous offer, and immediately commenced to prepare herself, and to pack up a good supply of such delicacies as might please the appetite of a sick man, while Samuel Maynard went home to notify his wife and to make ready for the journey.

Directly after dinner they set out, in a stout buggy, with a good horse before them, and took a southwestern course, in order to strike the river near the wood-yard from which the letter had been sent.

They had been gone hardly two days, and John Maynard was feeling quite lonesome and peevish, in the absence of his daughter, and under the unpleasant ministrations of Samuel's wife, when Ned Starling himself arrived in Madison county, and went direct to the place where he expected to find his promised bride.

He had remained several days at the house of Mr. Hargons in order to rest himself after his long and somewhat eventful journey, and to procure suitable horses for himself and his friend. When he started on his way, at last, it was in a cheerful mood, and with a heart full of hope and bright anticipations of the future. Fleetfooted as his horse was, the route seemed very long, and the hours seemed to drag very slowly, as he traversed the space that separated him from Mary Maynard.

As soon as he reached Madison county, he inquired for John Maynard's house, and went there at once, his impatience not permitting him to stop a moment at any other place.

When he had tied his horse to the fence, and walked up the graveled path to the door, his heart thumped almost audibly, as he thought of the pleasure that would be his in meeting the girl whom he loved more than any thing else on the earth. Here was an end to all his dangers, hardships, privations; here was rest for the wearied soldier; here was peace; and here,

above all, was love—constant and enduring love—which had waited for him so long and so faithfully, and which would soon be his own forever.

He knocked, and the door was opened by a slatternly woman, dressed in tawdry finery, and rejoicing in a red nose, who inquired his business.

"Is Mr. Maynard at home?"

"Yes; he's home, and well he may be, as he can't git out, for he's mighty sick, stranger."

"Can I see his daughter, then?"

"No; you can't see Mary, 'cause she ain't home, and she hain't been home, goin' on two days."

"I will thank you to show me to Mr. Maynard's room, as I desire to see him immediately."

"Who shall I tell him is wantin' him?"

"Never mind my name. He knows me well, and will be glad to see me, however sick he may be."

The woman looked at Starling suspiciously, grumbled and hesitated, but finally led him to Mr. Maynard's room, and entered it after him.

The old man, who was lying helplessly on his bed, turned his face toward them as they came in, but the light of the sick-room was dim, and he did not recognize, in the fine-looking and full-bearded young man before him, the boy from whom he had parted four years ago. He would as soon have expected to see an angel from Heaven as Ned Starling, who, as he fully believed, was lying sick, many miles away.

"Don't you know me, Mr. Maynard?" eagerly asked the young man, as he took off his cap and stepped forward to the bedside.

"There is something in your face and voice that seems familiar to me, and I think I ought to know you. I am certain that I have met you before, but really, young gentleman, I can't say when or where."

"I did not think that you would have forgotten me so soon, though I have changed considerably since you last saw me. My name is Edward Starling."

With a suppressed cry, the sick man raised himself up on his elbow, and stared wildly at his young visitor.

"Ned Starling!" he exclaimed. "It can't be possible; and yet I believe that it is he. What does this mean? Are you really alive and well? Are you not sick and nearly dead with a dangerous fever? If this is a joke that you are endeavoring to put upon us, sir, I can tell you that it is a very poor one, and that it will gain you no favor in my eyes, or in those of my daughter."

"I am at a loss to imagine what you mean," replied the young man, who was utterly bewildered. "I am really Ned Starling, and I am alive and in perfect health, and I have not sought to put any joke upon you or Mary. I wrote to Mary, from Texas, saying that I would be here before Christmas, and here I am, and I don't know how to account for such a strange reception."

"Mary received another letter from you, the day before yesterday," persisted Maynard, "informing her that you had been taken sick with

a fever, and found yourself unable to proceed any further when you reached the Mississippi River. You said that you were then lying in a wood-cutter's cabin, without medical attendance and without nursing, and you begged her to come to you immediately. She set out to find you, accompanied by my brother Samuel, a few hours after your letter was received."

"I am still more amazed, and am utterly unable to comprehend you. I have written no such letter. I have not written to Mary since I left Texas. I have not been sick, but have enjoyed the best of health, with the exception of a little fatigue."

"The letter, then, must have been a forgery, and the matter must be investigated. This is my sister-in-law, Mr. Starling, my brother Samuel's wife. She is kindly taking care of me, during Mary's absence."

Ned turned toward the woman who had opened the door, and noticed that she was very pale as he looked at her, and that she trembled so that the candle she held almost fell from her hand. She soon made an excuse, and left the room.

"My opinion agrees with you, my dear sir," said Starling, when he was alone with the sick man, "that this matter must be investigated. I wish I could see the letter that Mary received, purporting to be from me."

"She has taken it with her. She noticed, while she was reading it, that the handwriting varied from yours, and even my old eyes could perceive a difference between the two letters; but we supposed that it was caused by your sickness."

"The letter was a base forgery, Mr. Maynard, but I am still in the dark, for I cannot imagine who can have committed it, or what can have been the motive of the forger. For my part, I have not, to the best of my knowledge, a bitter enemy in the world, and it is certain that I can have none in this part of the country. It seems to me that the design of the villain, whoever he may be, must have been directed against Mary, and that an infamous plot has been devised, probably by some person who was well acquainted with the facts of the case. Have you told any one that you were expecting me?"

"No one but my brother Samuel. I showed him your letter, and I suppose, as a matter of course, that he spoke of it to his family."

"Have you no enemies in this neighborhood?"

"None at all, I believe—with the exception, perhaps, of that thieving scoundrel, Ben Bandy, who, I have no doubt, is guilty of more than half the horse-stealing and nigger-stealing that is carried on in the country. I denounced him, not long ago, and we ordered him to leave the country, but he fortified his house, and collected his friends, and persists in remaining. I have heard that he has threatened to be revenged upon me for the part I took in exposing him."

"Is he in the neighborhood now?"

"That is more than I can tell you."

"I must make some inquiries about him. The best thing I can do, it seems to me, will be to follow on the track of Mary and her uncle, overtake them and bring them back, if I can, or learn what has become of them. I am sorry to

leave you but I am afraid this is a serious matter."

"Don't trouble yourself about me, my boy. Any thing would be better than this suspense about Mary. I will get along very well, and the only anxiety I shall have will be to hear from you."

Mrs. Maynard brought in some supper for Starling, and he noticed that she regarded him with a suspicious and half-scared expression. He ate but little, but listened attentively to Mr. Maynard's description of the place from which the forged letter had been sent, and of the route that had probably been taken by Mary and her uncle.

In the evening he strolled out, to gain some information concerning Bandy, who, he learned, was then absent from the neighborhood. Early in the morning he said good-by to Mr. Maynard, bidding him be of good cheer, mounted his horso, and set out on his search for Mary.

CHAPTER VII.

TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS.

WHEN Starling was gone, old John Maynard's spirits sunk, and he became quite sad and despondent. Hitherto he had borne up well under his sickness, supported by the hope of Starling's return, and of seeing his dear child united to the man of her choice; but this blow was too much for his strength. He could not doubt that Mary had been decoyed away by some enemy of his own, who wished to inflict upon him the severest blow that could be given.

Ben Bandy was the only person whom he could suspect of being such an enemy, for he knew the vindictive and remorseless character of the marauder, who had, secretly but terribly, visited with his vengeance nearly every man who had attempted to oppose him, or denounce his villainies. The old man shuddered, and grew deathly sick at heart, as he thought of what his daughter's fate might be, if she should fall into the hands of such an unprincipled scoundrel.

Under these circumstances, it was not to be expected that his health would improve. On the contrary, he failed and sunk rapidly, until he became the mere shadow of the stout John Maynard, whose cheery voice and hearty laugh were once so well known and loved in the neighborhood. His condition was rendered worse by the disagreeable manners of his sister-in-law, who daily became more of an eye-sore and incubus to him.

Starling had not been absent much more than forty-eight hours, when John Maynard was surprised and shocked by the appearance of his brother, who returned on horseback—not on the horse with which he had set out—with clothes torn and covered with mud, and his whole appearance indicating that he had met with some misfortune, or had been seriously maltreated in some manner. His face was pale and haggard, his hands were tremulous, his eyes emitted a furtive, fearful, and uncertain gleam, and he looked as if years had passed over his head since he left that house with Mary Maynard.

He entered his brother's room with downcast eyes, with an expression of such intense sorrow

and pain, that it at once attracted the attention of the sick man, who partly raised himself up in his bed, wondering what new piece of terrible intelligence was about to burst upon him. At the same time he noticed the condition of Samuel's clothes, and the fact that he was alone.

"What is the matter, Samuel?" he asked, in his weak and plaintive tones. "What does this mean? Why have you come back alone, and in such a plight?"

Samuel made no answer, but stood before him with bowed head.

"Was Starling very sick? Did you leave Mary with him?"

"No, brother."

"Had he recovered? Did you bring Mary back with you? Samuel Maynard, where is my child?"

"I am almost afraid to tell you. In your present condition the shock of the sad news that I have to communicate might be fatal to you," responded Samuel, whose face was now ashy pale, and who trembled more violently than before.

"Speak out! Tell me at once, and tell me fully, for this suspense would be certain to kill me. Where is my child?"

"She is dead!"

Without a cry, without even a groan, John Maynard fell back in his bed, senseless and apparently lifeless. His brother took advantage of the occasion to step to a cupboard, and helped himself to a glass nearly full of brandy, which he poured down his throat, and which appeared to brace his shattered nerves. Then he poured out some more, and moistened the old man's lips with the liquor, and rubbed his forehead and his hands with it. It was not long before John showed signs of life, opened his eyes, and stared wildly around.

"Prop me up," he said, with a voice that was wonderfully clear and firm.

Samuel hastened to do as he was bid, placing the pillows behind his brother's back, and raising him to a sitting posture.

"Now," said the sick man, "you may tell me all about it. I can bear to hear it now, and I wish to know all."

Thus pressed, Samuel Maynard commenced to tell his story, turning his furtive eyes in every direction, to escape the searching and inquisitorial gaze of his brother.

"We got along very well," said he, "although the horse could not travel fast enough to suit Mary, who was very impatient to reach her journey's end, until we reached the river, a short distance above Deer Creek Bayou. At that place the road ran near the bank of the river, and it was crossed by a slough. There had been a bridge over the slough, but it was broken down at that time, and there seemed to be no way of getting ahead any further. I got out of the buggy, giving the reins to Mary, and walked forward a short distance to seek a passage across the slough.

"I found one, after some time, and was returning to the buggy, when the horse, which had been very gentle so far, suddenly commenced backing. Mary became frightened, and pulled the reins, instead of whipping up the horse, which made him back the more. I ran

forward and caught the horse's head, just as the hind wheels of the buggy reached the edge of the bank; but I was too late; the wagon and the horse went over the bank together, dragging me with them, and we all fell down more than twenty feet, into the muddy current of the Mississippi. How I got out, it is impossible for me to tell, but I found myself on the bank at last, badly bruised, and almost suffocated. I saw the horse struggling in the stream, unable to get loose from the buggy, but I could see nothing of Mary.

Although I was hardly able to move, I managed to crawl up the bank, and watched the sad scene with a breaking heart, until the horse and the buggy sunk together. I made my way, with great difficulty, to the nearest house, which was about two miles from the scene of the disaster, where I told my story, and gave directions that the buggy should be fished out of the river, and that a reward should be offered for the recovery of the body. I procured a horse at that house, and, without stopping to rest, came here as soon as possible, to bring you the dreadful intelligence."

When he had finished his narrative, Samuel Maynard put his handkerchief to his eyes, and shed tears abundantly.

"And that is how it happened," said John, still speaking in clear, firm tones, and keeping his cold and piercing eyes fastened on his brother, as if he would read his inmost thoughts. "I am glad that you left directions about the buggy. That will be something saved. I suppose you didn't go to see young Starling."

"I did not. I thought it would be useless, as Mary was lost, and considered that the best thing I could do would be to come home and inform you of what had happened."

"It would have been useless, as I have seen him."

"You have seen him?" exclaimed Samuel, his face again turning ashy pale.

"Yes; he was here day before yesterday. He was in perfect health. He said that the letter which Mary lately received was a base forgery, and he set out yesterday morning, hoping to overtake you before any more harm could be done."

"God in heaven!" ejaculated Samuel Maynard, with well-feigned emotion. "Are such things possible? Who can the writer have been, and what could be his motive for such a diabolical action?"

"It was some one, without doubt, who was well acquainted with the circumstances of Mary's engagement, and with young Starling's handwriting. I thought, at one time, that it might be that notorious scoundrel, Ben Bandy, who has a grudge against me; but it is not likely he has ever seen Starling's handwriting, or that he knows anything about him, for I have spoken to no one concerning Mary's engagement, except to you."

"I am sure," hastily interposed Samuel, "that I have never seen Starling's handwriting, except on one occasion, and when I merely glanced at it."

"You!" replied John, with a strange look in his cold eyes. "I have not accused you, brother Samuel, and hope I did not sinuate anything

against you. I merely say that some one is guilty of a great fraud, if not of something worse. If I was well I would investigate the matter immediately, but as I am not able to do so, I must leave it to you. I shall never forget your kindness to my child, and myself, brother. You had better go now and change your clothe^s, and you may be sure I will not forget you, brother—I will not forget you."

As soon as Samuel Maynard had left the room, John fell back in the bed with a deep groan, and a look of such unutterable anguish that it might have melted a heart of stone.

His brother went out into the kitchen, where he met his wife, whose nose was very red, and who was evidently much excited.

"So you have been and done it," said she, standing with her arms akimbo. "You've got rid of that gal fur sure, and I'm mortal glad of it."

"How do you know? What are you talking about?"

"Do you reckon I wasn't listenin' at the door, when you was tellin' John Maynard that purty story that you'd made up, about the hoss and buggy tumblin' over the bank into the river? Tell you what, I keey my eyes and ears open, and am bound to know what's goin' on. But come, old man, talk now what's goin' on. But look as if you had seen a ghost, or had been nigh scared to death by somethin'. Let me mix you some hot brandy and water. It will give you better feelin's an' make you look more like a man."

Samuel Maynard made no objection to this offer, and was soon sipping the steaming beverage. As he put the spirits down his throat, his own spirits rose higher, the color returned to his cheeks, and his manner again became bold and confident.

"Why didn't you come to me, afore you went in to see the old man?" asked his wife, who had not omitted to mix "some of the same" for herself. "I might have told you that that infernal Starling has been here, and put you on your guard."

"What was the use, Fanny? I admit that I was a little startled when I heard that he had turned up, as I thought he was provided for; but I judged it best to go to John and tell my story right away, and I think I carried it off pretty well."

"Yes; you did tol'able well, considerin' the state of mind you was in, and I'm afeard that that spoke fur itself. It's plain to me that John Maynard suspects somebody."

"Of course he does. He said he had been disposed to lay it on Ben Bandy."

"Not fur long, I reckon. It's my idea, Samuel, that he suspects you."

"What! Do you really think so?" exclaimed her husband, starting from his seat. "I noticed that he spoke to me very coldly, and that he looked at me very strangely, so that I could hardly keep my eyes from meeting his. When he spoke about that letter, he said that it must have been written by some one who knows all about Mary's engagement, and who was acquainted with Starling's handwriting. He more than hinted that I knew more about it than any one else. Yes, Fanny, it is likely that he sus-

peets me of having written the letter, if not of having made away with the girl!"

"I hain't a doubt of it, and if that sneakin' chap you call Starling comes back, as of course he will, he'll be sure to hunt the whole thing down, and find it all out, fur he's got a mighty sharp eye, I tell you, Sam Maynard. He made me trimble whenever I set eyes on him, but I reckon I didn't show it, and am thankful fur that."

"This must be looked to. You show more sense, Fanny, than I bad given you credit for. I will attend to it at once, for I am convinceel that that Starling is a dangerous fellow. I wonder if Ben Bandy is at home?"

"I know that he is; he came home late last night."

Samuel Maynard changed his clothes, mounted his horse, and rode down to Ben Bandy's house.

He found the Boss Pard seated in the parlor, which was his private room when he was at home, engaged in writing. He looked up with a sardonic smile as his visitor entered, and motioned him to be seated.

"I am glad to see you," said Bandy, "for I have been anxious about you. I want to hear a report of your proceedings, and to know what you have done with the girl, for I did not see you where you had promised to meet me."

"I thought it was useless, for an accident happened, while I was on my way to the place you spoke of, by which the girl was lost. In fact, she was killed, and I barely escaped with my life."

"As the girl is lost, my ten thousand dollars, I suppose, are also lost."

"I expect to pay you something, of course, for what you have done."

"But not my ten thousand dollars. It seems, my dear sir, that you thought it would be cheaper to make way with the girl yourself, and thus save your money, although you had expressly stipulated that no murder should be committed."

"What do you mean, Ben Bandy?"

"I mean that I remember and appreciate the old adage, 'honor among thieves'; but you, Maynard, are not a *bona fide* rogue, duly commissioned and qualified. If you were really one of us, I might trust you; but as you are not, the adage does not hold in your case, and it is necessary to watch you. From the time you left your brother's house, until you returned to it alone, you were followed by one of my men. It is not worth while, therefore, to tell you anything more, except that your niece was picked out of the water by two of my friends, while you were running away, frightened at what you had done, and that we brought her to life, although I must confess that it was a difficult thing to do."

"Is she still alive? Where is she now?"

"She is alive, and in my possession, where she will remain until my ten thousand dollars are forthcoming, when she will be subject to your order."

"I suppose, then, that you believe I wanted to cheat you."

"That is a matter of no consequence, my dear sir," said the Boss. "Suppose we allow it to

pass. I can afford to let by-gones be by-gones, so long as I have such good security for my ten thousand dollars."

"I would like to know how you became acquainted with Starling's handwriting, so as to be able to imitate it so well?" said Maynard, who was glad enough to drop such an unpleasant subject.

"It was quite simple. I found plenty of scraps of his handwriting in his saddle-bags, including his signature, and it was easy for me to imitate his style and his hand."

"In his saddle-bags? Where did you find his saddle-bags? Is it possible that you have seen him?"

"I set a watch on him, and some of my friends captured him and relieved him of his money. When I learned who he was—and he was quite frank and communicative about it—I detained him, and put him in close custody."

"When was he captured?"

"On the fourth or fifth of the month, and he is now a prisoner in the Garden of Eden, as I call my paradise of an island," replied Ben Bandy.

"You are mistaken on that point, or he takes remarkable liberties for a prisoner; for he has been in this neighborhood within the past two days, and it was only yesterday morning that he left my brother's house, to go in search of me and Mary."

"Is this true? Are you sure it is the same man?" inquired Bandy, jumping up with an oath.

"There can be no doubt, for my brother knew him, and my wife said it was Starling. We may expect him back soon, and then it is likely that he will look thoroughly into this matter, for Fanny says he is a right smart fellow, and that he actually frightened her."

"It wouldn't take much to do that," sneered the Boss Pard. "The young man may be sharp, but he is not sharp enough to get ahead of me. I left him and an old Methodist preacher who was with him, in the care of two of my most trusty men, and I can't imagine how he contrived to make his escape. It is not possible that he bought himself out, for my men were good and true, and we had taken all his money. I must inquire into that matter, and in the mean time I will look after this slippery Starling. I suppose he went toward the river."

"Of course—in search of the wood-yard to which you wanted to send Mary."

"He shall be attended to. There is no proof against me, Maynard, but we are in the same boat, as I take it, and I look after my own interests when I look after yours. Don't forget my ten thousand dollars."

"I would like to know, Ben Bandy, what became of the girl when your friends, as you say, fished her out of the water. I returned to the bank in a very short time, but could see nothing of her."

"Do you remember an old log house, where you knocked and tried the door, but were not able to get in?"

"I do."

"She was in that house, together with me and two of my friends. I hope you are satisfied now. Good-by, Maynard, and don't forget my ten thousand dollars."

CHAPTER VIII.

NED MEETS THE PARSON.

It was with a heavy heart that Ned Starling set out on his search for Mary Maynard and her uncle. It was evident that she was the victim of a base fraud, of a most foul conspiracy, but who had perpetrated the fraud, and who were the infamous conspirators? His suspicions pointed to two men—Ben Bandy and Samuel Maynard.

In the course of the inquiries that he had made the evening before, he had learned that Ben Bandy was a mysterious and suspected man, who was often absent from his home, for weeks at a time, on business that he confided to no one. If such a man, vindictive and unscrupulous, as he was represented to be, had reason to hate John Maynard, nothing was more likely than that he would endeavor to deprive the old man of his child, by way of a complete and crushing revenge.

He had learned, also, that Samuel Maynard was his brother's next of kin, after Mary; that he was poor, and that he envied his brother for his riches. He was a very respectable man, but that had little weight with Starling, who had seen many very respectable men who were no better than other people.

The young man could easily perceive, therefore, a powerful motive on the part of either Ben Bandy or Samuel Maynard, and he had no doubt that, if the truth should be discovered, it would be found that one of those men was the perpetrator of the fraud and the outrage.

He went in a southwesterly direction, the same that had been taken by Samuel Maynard, and made inquiries in abundance on the way. At first he had no difficulty in tracking them, as he frequently met people who had seen them, and who remembered them well, from having observed the rare beauty of the young lady. But, after he had passed several cross-roads, in a section of country that was thinly inhabited, he lost all trace of them, and was unable, with his best endeavors, to recover the trail.

Disappointed and vexed at this result, he still pushed on until he reached the Mississippi, and continued to travel, southward, by the roads that lay nearest to the river, until he came opposite to the place from which the forged letter purported to have been written. Here he crossed to the other side, and visited all the wood-cutters along the bank, but he could find no such wood-yard as that mentioned in the letter, and no such person as Simms, who was represented as the owner of it, was known along the river.

Starling saw that there was nothing for it but to return to John Maynard's, and acquaint him with the failure of his mission. Accordingly, with greater heaviness of heart than he had ever before experienced, he recrossed the river, and slowly traveled back toward the northwest. At a house where he stopped to pass the night, he found a clew to one of the persons whom he was seeking. The farmer informed him that an elderly man, who answered to the description of Samuel Maynard, had stopped there a few nights before. His clothes were

torn and muddy; he was pale, nervous and much excited, frequently helping himself to brandy from a stone bottle that he had with him; and he said that he was on his way to Madison county.

Starling was quite certain that this person was no other than Samuel Maynard. Samuel Maynard, returning home alone! The thought was sufficiently suggestive to the young man, who set out early in the morning, and traveled at his horse's best speed toward the place of his destination.

He had got fairly within the limits of Madison county, and had reached a place where the road led through a dense forest, when he saw the flash and heard the report of a gun, that was fired from a clump of bushes at his left. At the same instant he heard the whiz of a bullet, and felt his cap partly lifted from his head. As his life was precious to him at that time, he did not wait for any more compliments of a similar nature, but struck his spurs into his horse, and dashed away from the dangerous locality.

He arrived at John Maynard's house without any further difficulty, gave his horse to a negro boy, and immediately went to the room of the sick man, whom he found, fortunately, quite alone.

A great change for the worse had come over John Maynard since Ned last saw him; but he smiled faintly as he recognized the young man, and requested him to lock the door and take a seat at his bedside.

"I have not found her," said Starling, as he seated himself by the bed, and took the hand of the old man.

"I know it. My brother has returned, and has told me all about her."

"What does he say has become of her?"

"He says she is dead."

"Dead! Do you believe him?"

"You shall bear, and then you may judge for yourself."

The old man then repeated the story that had been related to him by Samuel Maynard, almost word for word as he had heard it—such a strong and terrible impression had it made upon his memory. Starling listened attentively, and, when the account was finished, there was a dark frown on his forehead, and a baleful gleam in his eyes, as he exclaimed, in a hoarse and broken voice:

"It is he! He is the guilty man!"

"Don't speak so loud. Some one might hear you. Who do you mean?"

"Your brother, Samuel Maynard, and none other."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I do. I have suspected him all the time, and now I feel certain that my suspicions were just. Who else had so strong a motive?"

"I have thought of that, and I, as well as you, have more than suspected him; but we must not let him become aware of it now. I know that he covets my property, and that he is a scoundrel. My daughter was all that could stand between him and riches, after my death, and the temptation was a strong one, to such a man as he. The blow has nearly killed me, but I resolved, God permitting, to live a little longer."

"The only question with me, my dear sir, is

whether he has really killed her, or has made away with her in some other manner."

"Do you think it possible that she is still living? You almost put new life in me. What grounds have you for saying so?"

"I am inclined to believe that actual murder, especially the murder of his brother's child, would be a greater sin than he would dare commit. There are many ways in which he might have got rid of her, and effectually disposed of her, without being the instrument of her death. I hardly think he would have resorted to such violent means, or that he would have put her to death with his own hands."

"I hope you may be right. It is plain to me, now, that Samuel Maynard, whatever may have happened to her, is the cause of her disappearance. He coveted my property, and he hoped that she would die, but he hoped in vain. He saw me on my death-bed—for I will never get up from here, Starling—and he learned that she was engaged to be married to you, and that you were expected to arrive soon. He knew his chances would be lost if the marriage was consummated, and that there was but one effectual way to prevent it. If he has not actually killed my child, he has murdered her in his heart. Everything now rests with you, for I am helpless. If you really believe that she may be living, what do you propose to do?"

"I shall have some handbills printed and distributed along the river, offering a reward for the recovery of the body. In the mean time, I will remain here for a while, and it is probable that my suspicions will soon be either confirmed or dissipated."

"I don't see that you can do anything more. May God bless you, my boy, and aid you in your efforts to bring this impunity to light. You had better go into the kitchen now, and tell Mrs. Maynard to get you something to eat. After your meal, I wish you would ride down to Judge Bond's—you can inquire the way—and tell him that I desire him to come here to-night, on important business, without fail."

Starling went into the kitchen, where he found Samuel Maynard sitting with his wife. The woman silently set out some luncheon on the table, keeping her eyes averted from the young man, and soon made an excuse to leave the room.

Her husband, however, was more polite and communicative, and immediately commenced a conversation with Starling, which was kept up while he was discussing his luncheon.

"You are Edward Starling, I presume," said he, rubbing his hands and smiling in his most oily manner.

"That is my name; and you, as I am already aware, are Mr. Samuel Maynard."

"Precisely. You have doubtless heard, from my brother, of the sad accident by which my dear niece lost her life."

"He has told me everything, and you, who were apprised of my engagement, can imagine how deeply her loss has afflicted me."

"I pity you, my young friend, from the bottom of my heart."

Ned Starling darted a piercing glance at the speaker, under which Samuel Maynard quailed and turned pale.

"Is it not possible," said the young man, leaning his elbows on the table, and gazing intently at his companion, "that she may have been rescued from the water, or that she may have extricated herself from the buggy, and contrived to reach the shore in some way? You were so prostrated, as I understand, by your own injuries, and your immersion in the water, that you could hardly have retained clear possession of your senses, and some things may have happened, during that period, of which you were ignorant."

"Oh, my dear young friend, if that was possible, how it would fill my heart with joy! But I know, alas! too well, that all such hopes are utterly vain. I did not, at any moment, lose my senses, although I was in great agony and fear, and she could not have been rescued, or have reached the shore at any place without being seen by me. She must have either jumped out into the water or become entangled in the reins, for it is certain that she never came to the surface after the buggy fell into the river. No, Mr. Starling, we shall never see that dear child again on this earth, and it is our duty to become resigned to the will of Heaven."

"You, of all men, ought to know best what her fate really was, but I still have some hope, vain though it may be. I am now going to have some handbills printed, offering a reward for the recovery of the body, and I promise you, sir, as sure as there is a God in heaven, that Mary Maynard shall be found, whether she is alive or dead."

"May God grant it!" gasped Maynard, as he trembled before the steady gaze of the young man.

Starling rode down to Judge Bond's house, which he easily found, and left a message for the lawyer. Then he went to Jackson, where he ordered some handbills to be printed and circulated, giving a description of Mary Maynard, and offering a reward for the recovery of her body.

As he was returning to Mr. Maynard's, he espied a man approaching him, who was well-mounted, and dressed in black. He at once thought he recognized that stalwart figure, and, as he drew nearer to the horseman, he was certain that he had not been mistaken in his judgment, for he saw before him none other than his fellow-traveler in Arkansas, Father Higbie, the Plucky Parson.

If he was overjoyed at seeing his good friend, the preacher was no less gratified at the meeting, and they shook hands and exchanged greetings with a heartiness which showed how great was the respect that they entertained for each other.

"How is it that I happen to find you here, my dear sir?" asked the young man. "Are you residing in this neighborhood, or does your circuit extend through this section of country?"

"I have settled on a small farm, about twenty miles below Jackson, and within the circuit to which I am now assigned. The land is good, and will be sufficient to support my family, whom I shall bring here as soon as my duties will allow me to go after them. So you see, I will be quite comfortably situated. I have been up in the northern part of this country, to look

at some horses that were offered for sale cheap; but I feared that they had been stolen, and am returning without them."

"I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Father Higbie. It really seems providential—this meeting—for I could never need your advice and your assistance as much as I need them now."

"What is the matter? I hope you have not got into any trouble. Have you had difficulty in carrying out your matrimonial project? How did you find the young lady whom you expected to meet?"

"I found her gone—lost!" answered Starling, in a hoarse voice, and choking with the emotion that he had repressed before John Maynard and his brother.

"What do you mean? Has she married another? Is she dead? Explain yourself, my dear young friend, for my heart bleeds at the sight of your distress."

"Come home with me, Mr. Higbie. Come and pass the night at Mr. Maynard's house, where I am perfectly at home. You can advise me and comfort me better than any other man I know of. Besides, Mr. Maynard is very sick, perhaps on his death-bed, and he would be glad to see you. We will ride slowly, so that I can tell you, on the way, all that has happened since I parted from you."

The preacher gladly accepted the invitation, and Ned related to him, as they walked their horses, what he had heard from John Maynard concerning the forged letter that Mary had received, purporting to have been written by himself. He told how she had set out to visit and succor him, in charge of her Uncle Samuel, and how disastrously that journey had terminated, according to Samuel Maynard's account.

He also spoke of his own fruitless search, and plainly declared the suspicions that were entertained by him and Mary's father, mentioning the motives which might influence Ben Bandy or Samuel Maynard—more especially the latter—to put John Maynard's daughter out of the way. He closed by alluding to the agitation of Samuel Maynard, and the strange conduct of his wife, and to his own hope that Mary might yet be alive.

Father Higbie held down his head, and was very grave for a while, and Starling looked at him earnestly, waiting impatiently to learn what he thought of this strange story. When he again straightened himself up, there was a smile—yes, actually a smile—on his rugged countenance.

"You thought that our meeting was providential," said he. "I hope it is. I wish you would tell me, as near as you can, where this accident, that you have related, happened."

"A short distance above Deer Creek Bayou, on the Mississippi. Do you know the place?"

"I know it well. What was the date of the occurrence?"

Starling told the date as near as he could fix it.

"You were right in thinking that our meeting was providential," said the preacher. "On the day you mention, I was returning from Deer Creek settlement, where I had been holding a protracted meeting, and was riding up

along the river, accompanied by one of my converts of the island, whom you may remember as having been profanely nicknamed Jerks, when I saw a horse and carriage, with a woman in the carriage, go over the bank into the river."

"Then Samuel Maynard told the truth, and she is really dead," interrupted Starling.

"Wait until you hear me through, my young friend. No one else went down with the horse and carriage. I saw a man on the bank for a moment, but he immediately ran away. I hastened to the spot with my friend Styles; but, before we could reach it, a skiff had put out from the shore, with two men in it, who had rescued the woman from the water, and were landing her on the bank, some distance below. We followed them, and thought we saw them carry her into an old log cabin. I knocked at the door, but was unable to obtain admittance, and all was silent within. Thinking that there was something mysterious about the affair, and not having leisure to investigate it, I asked Brother Styles if he was again willing to prove his faith by his works. He replied that he was, and I directed him, then, to ascertain whether the woman was within the house, and to follow her wherever she might be taken to, until he could learn the meaning of the strange occurrence."

"It was Mary Maynard, and none other!" joyfully exclaimed Starling. "The man who ran away with her Uncle Samuel. My hopes are verified, and if she is still alive, I will not fail to find her. In the first place, we must find Styles."

"I told him to tarry, on his return, at the Deer Creek settlement, where I would meet him."

"We will go there to-morrow. But here we are, at Mr. Maynard's, and we must keep silence on this subject."

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. MAYNARD RAVING.

WHEN the two friends entered John Maynard's room, they found him in the company of his brother and his brother's wife, with whom he had evidently been conversing, and the conversation had not been a very pleasant one, to judge by the countenances of his two relatives.

Starling introduced Father Higbie to the sick man as a minister of the Gospel, and as a friend of whom he had already spoken. John Maynard cordially welcomed the good man, and expressed his pleasure at seeing him, but the others were surly and sour.

"I have asked Mr. Higbie to pass the night here," said the young man, "and I suppose he is hungry, as he has been riding all day."

Mr. Maynard requested his sister-in-law to prepare some supper, and it could plainly be seen, as she left the room, that she had been drinking very freely. In fact, she staggered so badly, that she could hardly reach the door. John Maynard sneered, and glanced expressively at Starling, while his brother grunted, and said that Fanny was sorely afflicted with rheumatism.

"Which way are you going, Mr. Higbie?" asked the sick man. "If your engagements do not prevent it, I should be very happy to have you remain with me a few days."

"I was going to my new home, which is about twenty miles below Jackson," answered the parson; "but as I have not brought the stock that I went to seek, it is useless for me to return at present, and I have concluded to ride down to a mission at the Deer Creek settlement, where I have lately been laboring, as I believe, with great profit to the souls of the people."

At the mention of Deer Creek, John Maynard looked up eagerly at the minister, and his brother started and turned pale.

"I shall accompany him," said Starling. "I have given orders for the handbills to be printed to-night, and I shall take them with me to circulate along my route, and to send down the river."

"Are you well acquainted at Deer Creek, Mr. Higbie?" Samuel Maynard ventured to ask.

"I am very well acquainted at the settlement."

"Where is the settlement?"

"Just at the head of the bayou, about a mile from the river."

"Are you acquainted among the people of the neighborhood?"

"I suppose that most of them, if not all, have attended the protracted meetings that I have been holding at the settlement."

"You have heard, I presume, of the sad accident that happened near the bayou, a few days ago."

"I had not heard of it," rather evasively replied the preacher, suddenly turning his dark and splendid eyes upon his questioner, who visibly shrank from under their gaze. "I had not heard of it, until my young friend here told me of the occurrence. As I know something about that country and the people, I may be of some service to him in his search for—for the body of the lost young lady."

"I hope you may be successful, as it would be a great consolation to her relatives. When will you start, Mr. Starling?"

"To-morrow morning, as early as possible."

In a few moments, Samuel Maynard left the room, put on his overcoat, mounted his horse, and rode away rapidly.

"Is not this a rather sudden move, my boy?" asked the sick man. "I thought you intended to stay here a few days, for a particular purpose."

"I did so intend, but I have gained some intelligence that impels me to leave."

"What have you heard? Have you still any hope?"

"A stronger hope than ever. It has given me new light."

The young man then related what Father Higbie had told him, concerning that part of the transaction which he had witnessed, and ended by expressing a hope that Mary might yet be alive, and a determination to find and recover her, as well as to punish those who had committed or aided the great outrage.

"You were right in your supposition, my son," said the old man; "except, as you must now see, Samuel Maynard did mean to commit a murder, whether he succeeded or not, for there can be no doubt that it was Mary who was in that wagon, and that he was the man who ran

away. Go, and may God guard and assist you. I shall pray for you continually."

"I am very sorry to leave you, when you are so sick, but I shall lose no time, and will return as soon as possible."

"Don't trouble yourself about me, my boy. I can get along as well without you as with you, and there is nothing you could do that would please me so much as to search for my child. Bring her to me, whether she is alive or dead, and I will pray God to let me live until you get back."

Father Higbie and Starling remained with the sick man until Judge Bond arrived, when they went to the kitchen to get their supper. The door was locked when they had gone, and John Maynard was left alone with the lawyer.

The two friends found the table set, with an abundance of food that was miserably cooked. Mrs. Maynard had just put her brandy bottle away in the cupboard, and she essayed to pour out some tea for the guests; but she was so thoroughly inebriated, and was so nervous under the searching gaze of those four eyes, which seemed to read her through and to know all about her, that Starling relieved her of the task, and she staggered to a chair, where she sat in silence, looking at the two men with a stupid and half-scared expression.

The preacher was on the point, more than once, of lecturing her concerning her condition, but he refrained, as he thought it would be useless at that time, and Starling turned the conversation into a channel that suited him.

"That was a dreadful accident, Mr. Higbie, that deprived old Mr. Maynard of his child," said he.

"Dreadful, indeed," replied the preacher, taking the cue. "It pains me beyond expression, to think that such a beautiful and amiable young lady should be so suddenly hurried into eternity, without a moment's warning, and without the least preparation for the great change."

Mrs. Maynard stared blankly at the speakers, and her face became absolutely livid.

"We have the consolation of knowing," continued Ned, "that she was a devout Christian, but that doesn't lessen the horror of the occurrence. If it had been any person besides her own uncle who was with her, people would have been likely to suspect that a murder had been committed."

"A murder!" exclaimed the woman, who was nearly frightened into spasms. "You don't mean to say that my husband—"

"We don't mean to say anything against your husband," interrupted Ned. "We were only speaking about how the affair would have looked, if the circumstances had been different."

Mrs. Maynard went to the door, and passed out into the hall that led to John Maynard's room. She knew that Judge Bond had arrived, as she had let him in. She knew that he was shut up with her brother-in-law, and she was curious to learn what important business had brought him there that night. By listening she might find out what was going on.

Ned suspected her motive, followed her into the hall, and caught her ear at the keyhole of the sick man's door. Perceiving that she was

discovered, she muttered something about thinking that she had heard Mr. Maynard call, and staggered back into the kitchen.

The two friends had hardly finished their meal, when Samuel Maynard came in, threw off his overcoat, and sat down by the fire. It was plain that he, also, had been drinking, for his breath smelt of whisky, and he seemed quite lively and good-humored.

"Where on earth have you been, Samuel?" asked his wife.

"I just rode over to our house, to see how the children were getting on, and I met a friend—a very particular friend, Fanny—just the man I was wanting to see. What are you doing here, my love? Why ain't you in brother's room, taking care of him?"

"Cause Judge Bond is in thar with him, and the door is locked."

Samuel Maynard's good humor passed away immediately, and his face was clouded by a dark frown.

"Judge Bond here at this time of night, and the door locked!" he exclaimed, in tones that indicated his consternation. "I wonder what has brought him here. Brother John's so sick that he ought not to be bothered by business, for it would make him worse; I reckon I had better go and see about it."

"Mr. Bond was sent for by your brother, and I know that they wish to be alone," said Starling.

"Ah! you know all about it, do you? You seem to be a very knowing gentleman," replied Maynard, and then he relapsed into silence.

At this point Mrs. Maynard began to moan and groan, as if in great agony, and could stand it no longer. She jumped to her feet, threw up her hands with a fearful screech, and fell at full length upon the floor.

Her husband, together with Father Higbie and Starling, went to her assistance. The preacher raised her in his powerful arms, and laid her on a sort of lounge that stood on one side of the room.

"It is fear that has affected her," he whispered to Starling, "and the effects of liquor."

Maynard wished to take her to her own room, but he was prevented from doing so, and she was soon revived, under the influence of cold water, which was applied, in the most vigorous manner by Ned and the preacher. When she came to life—though it could hardly be said that she came to her senses—her face was of a ghostlike paleness, and her lips were quite blue, while her teeth chattered, and her eyes had a wild and unearthly glare, showing that she was attacked by the most terrible of all frenzies, delirium tremens.

While she was stopping at the house of her brother-in-law, Mrs. Maynard, who had an almost ungovernable appetite for ardent spirits, finding herself free from the control of her husband, had indulged in her favorite vice to an almost unlimited extent. Eating little or nothing, she had occupied herself solely in drinking brandy, until it had got to be such a seeming necessity to her that she could hardly go ten minutes without her "dram." A short period of enforced abstinence had brought on the crisis, and the time of her torment had come.

Suddenly she put her hands before her face, and uttered a frightful yell.

"Go away!" she screamed. "Take 'em away, somebody. What do they want to come here and make faces at me for? They're going to bite me and tear me and burn me—that's what they are after. Help me, somebody, and drive 'em off, or I'll jump out of the window. And take her away—oh, do, please, take her away, for I can't bear the sight of her pale face, when I know that she's all dead and drowned."

"I will take her away! She is crazy! You are killing her!" exclaimed Maynard, rushing to the lounge.

"Not quite yet," said Starling, seizing him by his two hands.

"Get out of my way! What do you mean, boy? Do you think you can stop me?"

"I only mean to hold you," quietly answered Starling, tightening his grasp upon the wrists, until Maynard fairly winced.

In the mean time the woman continued to rave.

"No; she ain't dead, and she ain't drowned, though that big, black devil—yes, his face is like Sam Maynard's, and he has got my brandy-bottle—has pitched her down into the water. No; she ain't drowned, for thar's a bigger and blacker devil—a head and shoulders taller than any of 'em—a-waitin' thar, and he's got her—Ben Bandy has got her. Please take her away, somebo'y, and save me from him! Save me from both of 'em. Save me from Sam Maynard and Ben Bandy!"

Much more she said, in the same strain, but Starling had heard enough. He asked her husband if she had ever been taken that way before, and receiving no answer from the bewildered man, he stepped into John Maynard's room, which the lawyer had left a few minutes before. There he got a vial of laudanum, returned to the kitchen, poured out a large dose, and forced it down the throat of the frenzied woman. In a short time she sunk down on the lounge and closed her eyes in a deep and dreamless slumber.

Father Higbie and Ned, leaving her husband in a stupor by the side of the lounge, went to John Maynard's room.

CHAPTER X.

NED, AND THE BOSS PARD.

JUDGE BOND had left the house just before Samuel Maynard's wife was seized with her paroxysm; but the sick man had heard something of the excitement in the kitchen, and eagerly inquired what it meant.

Starling fully explained the nature of the disturbance, omitting no particulars of the unpleasant scene, and John Maynard was greatly surprised and shocked.

"I knew that she had been drinking very heavily," said he, "for she has not seemed to be sober since she has been in the house, and it has been very painful to have her near me; but I did not think she had given herself up to such excesses. She was always a weak-minded woman, and the brandy she has drunk has proved too strong for her brain."

"If this is the first attack it will not go hard with her," suggested Ned. "I am inclined to think that she was affected by remembrance of

the crime she was privy to, as much as by the liquor."

"Very likely. Her husband has told her everything, of course. Indeed I have no doubt that she is as guilty as he, in intention, though not in act. You have gained one more item of information, and that is a very important one. You have learned—if her raving can be credited—that Mary was taken out of the water alive, and that she is in the hands of Ben Bandy, the Boss Pard. That is horrible; better that she should be dead, than that she should remain in the power of that villain. You must search for her, and rescue her if possible."

"I will lose no time, and will leave nothing undone. You know that I will use every effort. I will start as early in the morning as I can, and I will have the advice and the assistance of my good friend, Father Higbie."

"Before you leave, I wish you would go over to neighbor Powell's, and request him to come and stay with me until you return, and to bring his wife or his daughter. I know that he will do me this favor, and you need only tell him that I'm very sick and in need of watchers."

Starling promised to attend to it the first thing in the morning.

"You must use as much speed as prudence will permit," continued the old man, "and I will pray God that I may last until I see you again. I seem to feel much better just now; but I suppose it is because I have lifted a weight off from my mind, and it may be only a flicker before the candle goes out. As you have a hard journey before you, you will need all the rest you can get, and you had better go to bed."

"We will sleep here," said Starling; "for I will not leave you until I know that you have a suitable person to take care of you."

Accordingly he made a bed for the preacher on the sofa, and rolling himself up in a blanket, laid down on the floor.

The young man was stirring at an early hour in the morning, and immediately went to the house of the neighbor of whom John Maynard had spoken. He found Mr. Powell to be a fine and sensible man, who needed no urging to comply with the request of his old friend, and who promised to come over to Mr. Maynard's with his wife, as soon as he had finished his breakfast.

Starling also called on a minister who lived in the neighborhood, and requested him to come in and visit Mr. Maynard, as he was dangerously ill and not expected to live. To neither Mr. Powell nor the minister did he say any thing of Samuel Maynard and his wife, except that Mrs. Maynard was unwell, and that the sick man needed more assistance.

He then returned to the house, where Father Higbie was engaged in religious conversation with John Maynard.

As Samuel Maynard nor his wife were yet visible, the two friends helped themselves to such a breakfast as they could find, and put some cold meat and bread in their saddle-bags, as provision for their journey.

They waited until Mr. Powell and his wife arrived, when they said farewell to Mr. Maynard, who blessed them most fervently, then mounted their horses and set out on a journey, which

Starling believed to be the most important one of his life.

The two friends rode as rapidly as they dared to push their horses, only stopping about noon, for luncheon and a brief rest. Night overtook them near a farm-house, at which they both concluded it would be best to pass the night, as they were quite tired, and their horses were nearly used up. A night's rest was really necessary, as it was probable that they would require all the strength and energy of themselves and their animals on the morrow.

They were kindly received and hospitably entertained by the farmer and his wife, who, when they had ascertained the business of the travelers, and had read the handbill that Starling gave them, sympathized with their guests most heartily, and promised them all the assistance in their power. The two horses were well stabled and well fed, and their owners sat down to a substantial and excellent supper, such as neither of them had enjoyed in a long time.

Next morning, as soon as they had eaten their breakfast, and said their adieus to their friendly entertainers, they mounted their horses and went their way, feeling fresh and vigorous enough for any emergency.

They had traveled about three hours, and the sun was climbing up a cloudless sky, when they stopped to water their horses, at a brook that crossed the road. While there, they were overtaken by another horseman, who also halted for water.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," said the stranger, who was a tall, finely-formed, and well-dressed man.

"Good-morning, sir," responded the two friends.

"This is a cool morning, but the air is fresh and invigorating, and we have the promise of a pleasant day," continued the stranger.

Starling started. There could be no mistaking that peculiar and melodious voice.

"The Boss," he whispered, nudging Father Higbie with his elbow.

The friends reined up their horses, and crossed the creek, and were followed by the stranger, who seemed determined to keep in their company.

"I stopped, last night, at a farm-house on the road," said he, "to obtain rest for myself and my horse; but I was told that I could not find it there, as two gentlemen had taken a room at the house, and had bargained that no one else should be admitted. Were you the two exclusives?"

"We were," answered Starling. "We were very tired, and did not wish to be disturbed."

"You ought to remember, I think, that others may be tired as well as you. But I have no desire to quarrel about it. Are you from a distance?"

"We left Madison county yesterday morning."

"Do you reside in that neighborhood?"

"My friend is a Methodist preacher, who has recently located there, and I have purchased a tract of land near Jackson."

"Indeed! Then we are neighbors, for I live in Madison county, and have a fine farm there. My name is Ben Bandy."

Starling started again, and felt for a pistol, upon discovering that Ben Bandy and "the Boss" of the marauder's island, were one and the same person. His first idea was to rush upon the villain, capture him, and deliver him into the hands of justice; but, on second thought, he saw that there was no proof against him, except the raving of a crazy woman, and even she had not really charged him with any crime. He concluded, therefore, that he would treat Bandy politely, for the present, and would watch him.

"Are you going far?" asked Bandy, without seeming to notice the agitation of the young man.

"We are going to the river, in the first place," replied Ned, "and then our course will be governed by circumstances. My object is to search for the body of a young lady who is supposed to have been drowned."

St. "ng gave one of his handbills to Bandy, and the latter read it attentively.

"I think I have heard of the occurrence," said he. "It was a sad disaster. You are going on a melancholy errand, sir, and I wish you success. If you will give me a few of those handbills, I will distribute them where they may be of service."

Starling handed him a few of the papers, and a conversation of a more general and desultory character followed, which was kept up until they reached the river.

As they rode to the edge of the bank, and looked down at the turbid current, they saw a small boat that was crossing to the Tennessee's side. Ben Bandy gazed intently at the boat for a few moments, and then his lips contracted, his eyes shot fire, and a dark frown overspread his countenance.

"I wish you good-day, gentlemen," he said, bowing politely. "My way lies up the river."

So saying, he rode off briskly, up the road that led toward the north.

CHAPTER XL

JERKS ON THE TRAIL.

FATHER HIGBIE's friend Styles—who was more commonly called Jerks—was of the same opinion as the preacher, when he witnessed the upsetting of the buggy into the river, and the rescue of the woman from the water—namely, that it was a mysterious affair, and that, as he expressed it, some devilment was going on. When he found it impossible to enter the house into which she had been taken, he was confirmed in this opinion, and he readily obeyed the direction of Father Higbie, to find out what became of the woman, and to learn all he could about her.

He waited near the log cabin about half an hour, before he could hear or see any thing that he wished to know. Then the door was opened, and the woman was brought out, supported or held by the arms of the two men who had carried her in. She appeared to resist, and even screamed more than once, but was dragged on, nevertheless, toward the river.

Behind her walked a tall man, the sight of whom caused Jerks to give utterance to an audible grunt, for he immediately recognized "the

Boss," from whose iniquitous service he had recently escaped.

"Jest as I thought," said he to himself. "I knowed thar was some devilment goin' on, and when the Boss is around, a man may be sure of it, for Satan finds some mischief still, fur hands like his'n fur to do."

In the men who were taking the woman to the bank, he recognized two brutal fellows of Ben Bandy's clan, and creeping as near to them as he dared, he heard "the Boss" tell them to take her to the island, and keep her safely until he should come there. She was then placed in the boat, and ferried over to the other shore, while Bandy mounted his horse and rode away toward the north.

"Reckon I see the thing stickin' out now, jest as plain as the truth of the gospill," muttered Jerks. "I'm mighty glad and thankful that Parson Higbie set me to watch that woman, 'cause I'll have a chance, if I ain't powerfully mistooked, to do a little good by the way of helpin' to balance my pile of sins. All I want now is a boat, and then I can soon be sart'in whether they really mean to take her to the island or not."

He ran down the river-bank for some distance, keeping a sharp lookout, until, to his great surprise and joy, he perceived a skiff, tied to a log at the edge of the water.

His joyful look changed to a very solemn expression when he reached the boat, for he remembered what Father Higbie had told him concerning the sin of stealing, and he was troubled with scruples of conscience about appropriating the property of another; but the necessity of the case prevailed, and he jumped into the skiff, promising himself that he would return it as soon as he could.

Waiting until the other party had crossed, and had disappeared in the woods, he pushed out, and quickly rowed over to the other shore. There he hauled up the boat, tied it, and concealed it as well as he could. He then scrambled up the bank, and walked rapidly to the place where the two men and the woman had landed.

Having once found the trail, Jerks had no trouble in following it. He had so often traced runaway negroes through the woods, and people who were supposed to carry money about their persons, that it was comparatively easy for him to keep on the track of two men and a woman.

He followed them with such certainty and rapidity, that it was not long before he came near enough to see them, and to hear the men as they spoke to each other. The woman was silent, and showed symptoms of fatigue. Thinking that this was a little too near for safety, he fell behind, and followed the trail at about the pace of those whom he was pursuing.

Thus they went—the two rustians and the weak and worn-out woman, with the repentant and reformed robber on their trail—through forests of gigantic trees, through thickets of tangled vines and underbrush, through swamps shadowed by funeral cypresses, through almost impassable cane-brakes, through dangerous morasses, and around dark and sluggish bayous, until the foremost party reached a small and di-

lapitated log-cabin. They were in good time, for night was closing upon them, and the woman was so fatigued that she was absolutely unable to go any further, and the men were obliged to carry her within the shelter.

Jerks recognized the house as belonging to one of Bandy's gang, and concluded that the party would pass the night there. He resolved, therefore, to remain in the vicinity until they should again set out in the morning, when he would continue the pursuit.

He had had nothing to eat since morning, and had no present prospect of obtaining anything; but he was quite proud of the privilege of suffering in what he considered a good cause; so he picked out a rude spot among the canes, and laid down to sleep, after offering up a rude but heartfelt prayer.

He left his hard and cold couch before the sun rose, shook himself, and "snaked" his way to the cabin. Looking through a chink, he soon satisfied himself that the woman was still there, and that she was young and beautiful, although she was so pale and worn. Therefore, he still waited.

His patience was rewarded, at last, by the appearance of the two men, who led out the woman, placed her on a horse, and resumed their journey. Their pursuer followed them at a safe distance, and had the satisfaction of seeing that their course tended toward the island, which was the headquarters of the clan. Before noon they reached the lake, as their progress was more rapid than it had been the day before; the horse was stabled at the house where Starling and Father Higbie had been captured, and the woman was placed in a boat that lay at the shore.

Jerks was now satisfied, and at once determined on his course.

"I know a trick worth two of that," he said to himself, and hastened to another part of the lake.

There he found his own canoe, which he had hid among the canes, swiftly paddled himself over to the island, and went, by a "short cut," which was known only to himself and Jerry Haines, to the cabin that had witnessed such a great change in his heart and his life. The door was open, and no one, to judge from the appearance of the cabin, had been there since he had left it.

He immediately collected some dry leaves, twigs, and boughs, with which he made a roaring fire in the fire-place, and then, throwing himself down on the pile of blankets and buffalo-robés, which still remained in the corner, pretended to be asleep. He had hardly completed these preparations, when the two ruffians entered the cabin, leading the woman.

"Hello, stranger!" exclaimed one of them. "Who are you, and what in thunder are you doin' here?"

"Hello, yourself!" answered Jerks, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"Durned if it ain't Jerks! Whar did you come from, old coon?"

"Tain't nobody else, boss. Is this you, Tom? And Sam Bird, too? Glad to see you, for it's powerful lonesome here. I've been up the country on some business, and only got back a little

while ago. What sort of a crittur have you got thar?"

"It's a woman crittur that the Boss and us fished up out of the Mississippi. He told us to bring her here, and keep her safe till he come. Mighty glad you've got a fire here, old chap. Is there anything to eat about the shanty?"

"Well, I dunno. Thar used to be some corn-meal and bacon, but I've just got back, and I can't say what's been goin' on while I've been away. I'll look around, and see what I can find."

"Have you got any whisky?"

"Nary drop. The whisky is done drunk up, and the bar'l is hu'sted."

The young woman, who had thus far remained standing, in a sort of despairing silence, now spoke, and addressed herself to Jerks.

"Oh, sir!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands, "have you not a spark of pity left in your breast? If you have, show me some mercy. Tell me where I am, and take me away from here. I was going to visit a friend, who is dangerously ill. He said he would die if I did not come to him. My uncle went with me, and he drove me over the bank into the river, as I sat in the wagon. I am grateful to those who rescued me, but why have I been brought to this place, and why am I kept here? I beg you, as you hope for mercy hereafter, to release me. Take me to my sick friend, and then take me home. My father is rich, and he will pay you well."

"Oh, git out!" replied Jerks, with one of his hard, old laughs. "That sort of talk won't do you no good on this here island. The orders of the Boss have got to be obeyed, and that's all thar is about it. Make her sit down by the fire, boys, while I hunt for suthin' to eat."

After a little rummaging, the reformed robber brought out some corn-meal, bacon and dried venison, which he cooked in the most primitive style. The young woman would have nothing, but he ate like a man who had been fasting, and his comrades were almost equally voracious.

"I reckon, boys," he said, when he had finished, "that your woman crittur is more tired than she is hungry, and I'll fix her up a place, so's she can sleep if she wants to, for I'm thinkin' the Boss would like her to be well-lookin' when he comes to see her."

The ruffians laughed, and Jerks chuckled, as he took two blankets, and partitioned off a corner of the room with them. Then he spread some blankets in a corner, and told the young woman to come in. She obeyed willingly, for she was very weak and heart-sick. As soon as she was hid from the sight of the others, Jerks went close to her, with as pleasant an expression as his countenance could assume.

"The Lord have you in His holy keeping!" he whispered.

"What do you mean?" asked the woman, starting back in astonishment.

"Sh-sh-sh! That's suthin' Parson Higbie taught me, and I said it 'cause I thought it was good. Don't be afeard of me, but keep still. Whar do you come from?"

"From Madison county, Tennessee."

"I guessed right, bless the Lord! What is your name?"

"Mary Maynard."

"Jest what I heerd the young gen'leman a-sayin'. What's the name of the sick man you war goin' to see?"

"Edward Starling."

"That's him—him as was along with Parson Higbie. Thar's been some swindle here, sur he hain't been sick, 'cause I see'd him cross the river with Parson Higbie, and he was well and stout, and was goin' to see you. Do you know Parson Higbie?"

"No."

"I know him, and I know the young gen'leman, too. The parson told me to look arter you, when you was fished outen the river. I can't talk to you now, but you must jest wait. Don't mind anythin' I do, but be as cross to me as you can. Go to sleep now, and I'll git suthin' good fur you to eat."

"What have you been doin' in thar, Jerks?" asked Sam Bird, in a bantering tone. "That young woman is our Boss Pard's property, and you had better not be meddlin'."

"If she takes a fancy to me, how am I goin' to help it?" he answered. "The fact is, boys, that she can't stand our bacon and hoe-cake, and I'm goin' to get suthin' that she can eat."

So saying, he took his rifle and went to the lake, where he soon shot some wild ducks. He brought them to the cabin, plucked and cleaned them, and roasted one, which he carried in to Mary Maynard's "apartment." She ate heartily of the savory bird, and her rest and her meal, together with the knowledge of Starling's safety, and the hope of regaining her own liberty, seemed to give her new life and beauty.

Thus matters went on at the cabin for several days. Jerks busied himself with procuring and cooking game for Mary Maynard, and with contriving projects for her deliverance; but his plans all came to nought, as the other two men kept a close watch upon her, one of them always remaining in the cabin, and as their fear of the "Boss" was too great to allow them to be bribed.

He remembered where he had buried, some time ago, a keg of brandy, that he had stolen on one of his expeditions. Joyfully he ran to the place, dug up the keg, and carried it to the cabin. He had no difficulty in persuading his comrades, who had been so long deprived of liquor, to "make a night of it," and supplied them liberally with the strong old brandy, while he himself only made a show of drinking. The result was that the two Russians were dead drunk before midnight, and unable to oppose him in anything he chose to do.

He then quickly filled a small bottle with the brandy, took his rifle and ammunition, stuffed a cold roast duck into his pocket, wrapped a blanket around Mary, and led her out of the cabin. The night was cold, but it was clear, and the moon was up, which was sufficient for Jerks, who was acquainted with every foot of the great morass, and knew where the rattle-snake lurked, and where couched the deadly moccasin.

Hastening to the lake, he found the boat in which Mary had been brought over, and paddled her to the other shore. The horse which

she had rode was still in the stable, and he again placed her on it and led her into the wilderness. When they were fairly out of sight of the lake, he asked Mary to dismount and join him in prayer. She did so, without the least fear of this strange creature, and together they gave thanks for her escape, and asked deliverance from all future perils of their journey.

"Who are you, my friend?" asked Mary, as he again assisted her to mount the horse.

"Why have you befriended me, and how did you happen to be where your help was needed?"

"I used to be a robber, and wuss'u that; but Parson Higbie made a better man of me. I told you that he sent me to look arter you, 'cause he knowed thar was suthin' wrong a-goin' on, and I'll take you home, with the Lord's help. He's a powerful good man, and likes the young gen'leman that you like."

He made the young lady take a sup of brandy from his bottle, and led her on, as rapidly as possible, over the same trail that she had once traversed as a hopeless captive.

At noon they lunched on the cold duck, and then Jerks made a *detour* in his route. He wished to avoid the cabin at which Mary had before stopped, and he felt sure that the men whom he had left asleep would not awake until morning, so that he would have several hours the start of them, even if they could find a boat on the island.

He considered himself safe, therefore, in halting for the night at the house of another member of Ben Bandy's clan, to whom he told a plausible story concerning his fair charge. The halt was really necessary, as Mary was quite fatigued, and both Jerks and the horse were pretty well tired out.

At this place they had some supper and a good rest, and they made an early start in the morning, taking a northeasterly course, so as to strike the Mississippi at the point where Mary had left it. When they reached the river, they spent some time in searching for the boat that had brought her over; but they found it at last, and then she again gave thanks for her liberation and preservation.

Jerks turned the horse loose, seated the young lady in the stern of the boat, took the oars, and rowed out into the river.

When he was about half-way across, his countenance fell, and he uttered a cry of consternation, as he saw another boat push out from the Arkansas shore.

"Thar they are!" he exclaimed. "It's Tom Allen and Sam Bird. Who'd have thought they could ketch up with us so soon? But they sha'n't git us, God helpin'!"

"There are some people on the other shore," said Mary, as the man plied the oars with redoubled vigor. "Is it possible that we are beset by enemies on both sides? Merciful God, deliver us from this peril!"

"No enemies thar!" joyfully replied Jerks, snatching a look over his shoulder. "Those men are Parson Higbie and your young gen'leman, and you are safe!"

Then he made the skiff fairly fly through the water, and in a few moments Mary Maynard was clasped in the arms of her lover.

CHAPTER XII.

BEN BANDY PURSUED.

"THAT was a strange leave-taking," said the parson, as he looked at the retreating form of Ben Bandy. "Our friend left us quite unceremoniously."

"He seemed to be 'taken with a leaving' very suddenly," replied Starling. "He must have seen something that didn't altogether please him, and I saw him looking at that boat which is crossing the river. The people in that boat, it appears to me, are in a great hurry, for they are making fast time through the water. See, Father Higbie! it is a woman who sits in the stern of the boat. It can't be possible that it is Mary—that she has been found and returned to us, and that Providence has sent us here to meet her!"

"It is not only possible that that is the young lady you speak of, but I believe it is really she, for I am certain that the man who is rowing is no other than Brother Styles, who is profanely called Jerks."

"But see, Mr. Higbie; another boat is pushing out from the opposite shore. They are pursued, and they know it, for the man is rowing as hard as he can. Let us go down on the shore, to meet them and keep off their pursuers."

The two friends hastily fastened their horses to some cottonwood saplings, and ran down to the edge of the river, where they encouraged Jerks by voice and gesture, and they soon had the satisfaction of making the boat fast at the muddy shore.

Mary Maynard, nearly fainting with joy, was handed out of the boat into the arms of Starling, who immediately assisted her up the bank, followed by Jerks and Father Higbie.

"Come," said Starling, "we are not yet free from danger, and we have no time to lose. I have no doubt that it was the boat that Ben Bandy saw, and that he knew who were in it."

"Has the Boss been here?" interrupted Jerks.

"He left us only a little while ago. The other boat, I suppose, has gone behind that island in the stream, but they have not given up the pursuit, and it is probably Bandy's design to try to head us off. You will have to guide us to the nearest farm-house, Father Higbie, for we must procure some horses, whatever the cost may be."

The nearest farm-house was more than a mile from the river, and they hastened thither, Mary Maynard riding behind Starling, and Jerks trotting along beside the horses.

At the farm-house, as soon as they could get rid of the inquisitive interrogatories of its owner, the young man purchased two horses, with their saddles and equipments, paying about twice the value of the animals. Mary and Jerks were well mounted, and they again set forth, followed by the wondering gaze of the farmer and all his family.

As they rode on, Starling gave Mary an explanation of those circumstances which were a mystery to her—about the forged letter, etc. They were not yet out of danger, however, and Starling did not feel entirely safe as they rode along, and he finally expressed himself to that effect.

The young man's fears were well-grounded. Just at the next turn of the road, where it en-

tered a thick piece of woods, the party was fired into from the bushes at each side.

The effect of the fire was terrible. Jerks was shot through the body, and fell to the ground. The Plucky Parson was wounded in the leg by buckshot, Mary Maynard's horse was killed, and another bullet went through Starling's hat. The next moment, Ben Bandy and five other men, including the two who had crossed the river in pursuit of Jerks and his charge, rushed out into the road, and commanded them to surrender.

As Mary was about to fall with her horse, Starling snatched her from her saddle, and placed her in front of himself. He then shot one of the assailants with a pistol, threw the discharged weapon at another, struck his spurs into his horse, and endeavored to force his way through; but it is probable that his effort would not have been successful, had it not been for the assistance of Father Higbie, who brandished his stout hickory stick, and vigorously applied it to the heads of his antagonists.

Astonished at this demonstration, they scattered for the moment, and the two friends profited by the opportunity to rush their horses through the opening, and to gallop away. They were immediately pursued by Ben Bandy and two of his men who were already mounted, and another who caught the horse from which Jerks had been shot.

Having splendid animals under them, and having a good start of their pursuers, Father Higbie and Starling rode rapidly at first, and seemed in a fair way to make good their escape; but, as the preacher was a "heavy weight," and as the young man's horse carried double, it soon became evident that the rustics were gaining on them, and must eventually overtake them.

"Down this way," said Father Higbie, as he turned into a cross-road. "This is the way to Deer Creek settlement. Push your horse as hard as you can, for we must reach the settlement before those scoundrels catch us, if it kills the beasts."

As they went down the road, several shots were fired at them, and Starling felt a sharp twinge in his left arm, which only made him ride the faster.

Still they galloped on, at the top of their horses' speed, and still their pursuers followed, gaining on them at every stride.

Suddenly, as they reached the summit of a slight elevation, the preacher uttered a cry of joy.

"There it is!" he exclaimed. "There is Deer Creek. Ride fast, and we are saved!"

Starling looked ahead, and at the foot of the slope he saw the "settlement," which was composed of four or five log houses, a grocery, and a blacksmith's shop. A number of men were collected in front of the grocery, and all of them appeared to be armed.

The fugitives spurred their wearied horses, and reached the first house just as their pursuers came clattering down the descent. The people in front of the grocery stared, and rushed forward to meet them.

"Friends and brothers, help us! We are pursued by murderers!" shouted the preacher, just before his horse fell to the ground.

The men who had been in front of the grocery

drew themselves up in a line across the road. Ben Bandy and his followers, seeing that they were baffled, halted for a few moments, and then rode back, a little less rapidly than they had come.

Immediately the travelers were overwhelmed with questions by the excited group. They were asked who they were, where they came from, and what was the matter. Father Higbie, who was very weak from loss of blood, was unable to answer, as he could hardly extricate himself from his horse, and had to be assisted into a house. Mary Maynard had fainted, and she, also, was carried into the house, while Starling hastened to follow her, his arm dropping blood as he went.

"We were just making up an expedition here, to go and hunt for some horse-thieves," said a man of respectable appearance, who seemed to be the leader of the party, and who at once took off Starling's coat, and commenced to dress his arm. "There have been a great many horses stolen in these parts lately, and we mean to put a stop to it if we can. I shouldn't wonder if those fellows who were chasing you are some of the very men we are after."

"I know," answered the young man, "that they belong to a gang of horse-thieves, highway-robbers and murderers, and they are led by Ben Bandy, the greatest scoundrel in the country. You could not do a better service, for the State and for yourselves, than to rid the world of them."

"If that's the case, sir, we'll put out after them, as soon as you and your friend are attended to. I notice that he is our parson, who has been doin' a power of preachin' down here lately. How did you happen to get in a scrimmage with those scoundrels?"

Starling related as much as he chose of his own adventures and those of Mary Maynard, taking care to say nothing that would criminate Mary's uncle, and at the close of the narrative his auditors were loud in their expressions of astonishment and indignation. As soon as they saw that the wounded men were cared for, they completed their organization, mounted their horses, and set out in search of the marauders. But they were not destined to succeed, for Ben Bandy and his gang had made good their retreat.

Ned's wound was a slight one, but that of Father Higbie, although not dangerous, was so troublesome that it was considered best for him to remain quiet for a few days. Mary and her lover, being anxious to reach home as speedily as possible, concluded that they would not wait for him, but bid him an affectionate farewell, and resumed their journey as soon as they were rested. The people of the "settlement" offered to furnish them with an escort, hoping that they might meet and capture some of the marauders, and Starling gladly accepted the offer, for Mary's sake. They traveled with reasonable speed, and reached John Maynard's house about noon of the day after they left Deer Creek.

CHAPTER XIII.

JOHN MAYNARD'S WILL.

WHEN Samuel Maynard left his brother's house, on the night of Father Higbie's arrival,

he went, as young Starling had afterward guessed, to the house of Ben Bandy, to communicate the recent important intelligence that he had learned, and to take counsel with the robber-chief concerning future operations, for he was obliged to confess that his affair was getting complicated, and he felt that he would be obliged to add more crimes to the list that already stood against him.

Luckily, as he thought, he found Ben Bandy at home, and the land-pirate smiled as his visitor entered the room.

"I will bet my head, Maynard," said he, "that you are in trouble again, and that you have come here to ask me to help you out of it."

"You promised to help me out of it before this," surlily replied Maynard, "but it seems that your promises don't avail me anything. You promised to take care of the fellow Starling, but he has come back safe again."

"Indeed! Are you sure it is he? It can't be possible."

"I left him at my brother's house, only a little while ago."

"It is strange. I sent a man to waylay him, who is a sure shot with his rifle, who never misses his aim."

"The fellow has a bullet-hole through his cap."

"He must bear a charmed life. I had him shut up, in a cabin on my island, as tight as a fly in a drum, and in the care of two of my most trusty men; but he managed, in some mysterious and unaccountable way, to make his escape. Then I sent my best rifle-shot, with orders to make sure of him, and a rifle that never failed before only sends a bullet through his cap."

"The preacher you spoke about, who was shut up on the island with him, is also at my brother's house."

"There is a pair of them, then, I believe, to take care of. What do they propose to do now?"

"The young fellow seems to have an idea that the girl was not really drowned. He has had some handbills printed, offering a reward for the recovery of the body, and he says that he means to find her, whether she is dead or alive. He intends to set out early in the morning, together with the preacher, to search for her."

"I wish them joy in their search. She is safely housed, where Satan himself couldn't find her, and I defy them to do their worst. You always look on the dark side of everything, Maynard. You ought not to think, because two little side plans have failed, that the whole business is bound to miscarry. Take some of my old brandy, to thaw out your wits, and I will tell you what I mean to do."

After listening to some further explanations, Maynard rode home very well satisfied with the result of his interview. He did not doubt for a moment that Ben Bandy would be fully able to do all that he had promised to do.

The disclosures that were made by his wife in her ravings, and that were listened to by Starling and Father Higbie, left him nearly stupefied with anger and apprehension; but he soon recovered his spirits, when he reflected that

those two depositories of his secret would not live long to tell it. He carried the sleeping woman to another room, where he locked himself in with her, and did not make his appearance until a later hour next morning, after Starling and his friend had gone.

During nearly three days after the departure of Starling and Father Higbie, Samuel Maynard absented himself entirely from his brother's room, alleging as an excuse for his seeming neglect, that he was obliged to attend to his wife, who was very ill. He left the sick man in the excellent care of Mr. Powell and his wife, and the neighbors whom they called in to assist them, only calling upon him occasionally to inquire about his condition. His brother, during this time, although buoyed up by the hope that Starling would return, and that he might possibly bring Mary home with him, was gradually but surely sinking, and the physician said that he could not live more than a few days, at best.

On the evening of the fourth day, Samuel Maynard went into the sick man's room, took a seat by his bedside, spoke to him very affectionately, condoled with him concerning his sickness, told him what the physician had said, and advised him to prepare for death.

"If you wish to give any instructions," said he, "with regard to your business or other matters, you had better make them known now, while you are still strong enough to do so."

John Maynard, who had thus far answered his brother in monosyllables, turned his head, and asked:

"Has Starling come? Has he brought Mary home?"

"Poor John!" exclaimed Starling. "I fear his mind is wandering."

As he spoke, there was a knock at the outer door, and he went to open it, leaving the door of the sick-room ajar.

"I want to see a young man named Edward Starling. I was told that I would find him here," said the visitor, in a loud voice.

"He left us three days ago," answered Maynard.

"I ain't quite so sure of that," answered the man, pushing on into the sick-room. "I mean to see with my own eyes whether he is hiding here or not."

"Perhaps I can answer for him, if the business is not strictly private," continued Maynard.

"No, you can't, for I want to see him. I reckon you wouldn't want to go to jail for him, and to be tried for horse-stealing in his place. Hello! you've got a sick man here. Well, I can't help that. People who will harbor such rascals, must expect to be troubled."

"What is the matter? What is that he says about Starling?" feebly asked John Maynard.

"I say," replied the man, "that I'm looking for a chap named Edward Starling, alias I don't know what. I am a deputy-sheriff from Mississippi, and I have a warrant against him for horse-stealing. He came from Texas about two months ago, with a bad character, and he turns out to be a regular horse-thief. Here is a handbill which describes the scoundrel, and offers a reward for him."

The sick man took the printed paper, raised himself in his bed by a great effort, and looked

steadily at his brother, who trembled and turned pale before the unearthly brilliancy of those accusing eyes.

"I do not believe one word of it," he said, convulsively tearing the handbill in two. "Is this your work, brother? Or is it a lie invented by Ben Bandy? Or is it a scheme planned by both of you, to rob the orphan, and to defraud the just? You will have your reward hereafter. Samuel Maynard, you are a double murd—"

The death-rattle ended the sentence, and John Maynard was a corpse.

The bogus sheriff's officer—for the man was one of Bandy's tools—hastily sneaked out of the house, and Samuel Maynard went into another room, ostensibly to hide his emotions, but really to seek solace in his brandy-bottle.

John Maynard was, indeed, dead. The last blow had been too much for his strength, and he had died in the very act of denouncing his covetous and treacherous brother.

In the morning, Samuel Maynard sent invitations to several of the neighbors, requesting them to be present at the house "lately occupied" by his deceased brother, at ten o'clock, to be witnesses concerning an important matter.

He was in the parlor at the appointed hour, accompanied by a lawyer from Jackson. Mr. Powell, the clergyman, the physician, and the neighbors who had been invited by himself, were there also, nearly filling the room. There was also present, an uninvited guest, in whom, to his vexation and dismay, he recognized Judge Bond.

When all were seated, and some cakes and wines had been passed round, Samuel Maynard rose from his chair, and repeated a sort of speech, which he had prepared and learned by heart the night before. After paying an apparently feeling tribute to the virtues and worth of the deceased, and lamenting his death, as that of one cut down in the ripeness of his useful years, he related the circumstances connected with Mary's engagement "to one so utterly unworthy of her." He then spoke of his journey with Mary, in search of that "unworthy one," and recounted, with copious use of his handkerchief, the sad occurrence by which she had lost her life. His brother, he said, had entertained a faint hope that she might yet be living, but he knew, alas, too well, that she was no more. Only himself, therefore, remained, "the sole survivor of his brother's family."

While this statement was being made, Judge Bond was called out of the room, but he soon returned, and there was a bright look in his eyes as he resumed his seat. He arrived in time to hear these words, which formed the conclusion of Samuel Maynard's speech:

"I now call you to witness, that I take possession of this house, and of the other property of the deceased John Maynard, as his brother and his next of kin."

"It is my duty to dispute your claim," said Judge Bond, "as I hold in my hand a will made by John Maynard, a few days ago, by which he bequeaths all his property to his daughter, without reserve; or, in case she should not appear and claim the same, within a year and a day, then it is to go to Edward Starling. In this

will Mr. Powell and myself are named as executors."

"If you have such a pretended will," replied Maynard, "there can be no doubt that it is a forgery, or that it was obtained under improper influence. It is not likely that my brother would leave his property to a horse-thief."

"My client holds possession, and will dispute any will," said Maynard's lawyer.

"Very well," returned Mr. Bond. "If you intend to dispute the will, it only remains to see whether you are the next of kin. I think I can produce a person who has a better claim."

So saying, he opened the door, and Mary Maynard walked into the room, supported on the arm of Edward Starling. She was immediately recognized and most cordially greeted by nearly all who were present.

Samuel Maynard, astonished and horror-struck at this unexpected sight, sunk into his seat. His eyes, staring wildly, were fixed upon his niece; his face suddenly became purple; he trembled violently from head to foot, and then fell on the floor in a fit.

At a whisper from Judge Bond, Starling led Mary into the chamber where her father's body lay, and she fell on her knees by the bedside, and shed tears abundantly.

So there was an end to Samuel Maynard's next-of-kinship, and of all his dreams of ill-gotten wealth. He was suffered to go unwhipped of justice; he sold all his property, left the State with his family, and was not heard of in that region again.

Ben Bandy, the Boss Pard, had been captured, and suffered the penalty of Judge Lynch's edict, thus breaking up the band of desperadoes that had invested that portion of the country.

After her father had been buried about six months, Mary Maynard, with the advice and best wishes of her friends, was united to Ned Starling, and the marriage was solemnized by Father Higbie, who, more than once before his death, was sent for to baptize the children of his dear friends.

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